

READING BETWEEN THE LINES: SOCIAL, CULTURAL, AND EROTIC CAPITAL IN  
AMERICAN AND IRISH WOMEN'S BOOK CLUBS

By  
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Doctor of Philosophy.

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## **ABSTRACT**

This dissertation examines the role of reading and book club attendance in the lives of Irish and American women's fiction readers who actively participate in women's book clubs. This research used mixed methodology, including ethnographic observation, participation in book club meetings, and in-depth narrative interviews. I examined how women developed a sense of social place, increased cultural capital, and developed gendered sexual identities through reading and participation in women's book clubs. Clear differences emerged in the different cultural contexts of each country, particularly as related to the role of reading in romantic relationships. Women in Ireland utilized reading and book clubs to develop knowledge and understanding; women in the United States were influenced to increase their status partially in order to potentially secure or retain a high-status romantic partner. At the same time, important key themes relating to social positionality and social networks, capital development, and the construction of sexuality were similar and central to women in both cultural environments. This research adds to our understanding of the sexual field by exploring the way women increased their erotic habitus outside of the sexual field for increased erotic capital within the sexual field.

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## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

One frosty Midwestern winter when I was 7 years old, my parents presented me with a wonderful gift – an electric blanket. I know that my accountant parents were trying to save money on heating, but for me, the new source of warmth provided much more. Finally, I could hide beneath the covers and surreptitiously read by the light of the electric blanket control until the sun came up without awakening my younger sister, or turning on the lights and alerting my parents to my wakefulness. I felt a strong drive to read, devouring books whenever I could, and I will never forget the laughter behind my parents' scolding – for how angry can a parent be when a child stays up too late reading?

I cannot recall a time before I was an avid reader. When I was a child, Santa Claus left books at the foot of my siblings' beds, and mine, gifting my parents with a few extra moments of Christmas morning sleep. Reading has always been central in my life; and so, as an undergraduate, when I first read Anne Lamott's words in my now dog-eared, heavily highlighted copy of her book, *Bird by Bird*, I remember feeling that I had a kindred spirit. I recognized that there were others who felt so strongly about books as I had for so long:

Because, for some of us, books are as important as almost anything else on earth. What a miracle it is that out of those small, flat, rigid squares of paper unfolds world after world after world, worlds that sing to you, comfort and quiet or excite you. Books help us understand who we are and how we are to behave. They show us what community and friendship mean; they show us how to live and die (1994:15).



This sentiment rang true for me, and brought to focus a sociological perspective I had not yet explored. More than a decade later, I embarked on my dissertation research. I spent my time in graduate school sociologically examining gender and culture, and I began to more fully realize the potential for understanding just how important reading can be. Reading is not solely about an individual interacting with a text, but reading can show us the world, and helps us know where we fit in the social environment. Despite having always considered reading a leisure-time activity, generally disconnected from my academic work, I was driven to uncover a deeper understanding of this shared cultural activity. The more I learned about the sociology of culture, the more I recognized the importance of literary consumption. Reading is not merely a separate activity we engage in individually, outside of our constructions of self and place in society, but can in fact be intrinsic to how many people come to be who they are today.

Women, what they read, and what reading means to them is an important topic in contemporary popular culture. *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* examined particularly steamy romance novels known as “romantica” or “mommy porn” in recent years.<sup>1</sup> Popular women’s fiction and erotic fiction continually top bestseller lists worldwide. Women’s reading habits and the gendered and sexual implications of these reading habits continue to remain not only newsworthy but sociologically relevant. I studied the role of reading and book

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, “Discreetly Digital, Erotic Novel Sets American Women Abuzz” *The New York Times* [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/10/business/media/an-erotic-novel-50-shades-of-grey-goes-viral-with-women.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/10/business/media/an-erotic-novel-50-shades-of-grey-goes-viral-with-women.html?_r=0) and “Books Women Read When No One Can See the Cover, *The Wall Street Journal* <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702304450004577279622389208292>

club attendance for women in Ireland and the United States, and sought to understand how women construct gender and sexual identities and navigate the social world, utilizing an international comparison to examine women's fiction readers who participate in women's book clubs. This sociological examination of contemporary women's fiction readers and the book clubs in which they participate allows us to better understand how women construct their identities amidst gendered cultural norms.

Whether viewed as "fluffy," leisure-time reading, anti-feminist romance or as literature with empowering possibilities for women, women's fiction remains a popular genre within contemporary fiction in both the United States and Ireland. Throughout this dissertation, I examine the ways readers develop a sense of social place, construct desire and develop gendered sexual identities, as well as how readers use both the narratives of the books they read and interactions in book clubs in constructing their own sexual narratives. While responses to literature vary in popular culture, the publishing industry, and in feminist debates, it is important to examine the ways women themselves engage with these important cultural artifacts. In a world that limits women's open expression of sexuality and desire, book clubs can provide one acceptable genre to publicly discuss desire and sexuality.

This dissertation makes several contributions to contemporary sociology. First, my research provides an additional example of people utilizing cultural objects, namely books, in a way that the object itself cannot foretell. This adds to the rich tradition in cultural sociology examining how people use cultural objects to

understand and navigate the social world. Additionally, this project examines the ways women's book club members in the United States and Ireland used reading and book clubs to develop social, cultural, and erotic capital. Women in Ireland used their experiences with book clubs primarily to gain an understanding and deeper knowledge about their social world while increasing and maintaining social capital; American women used their participation in book clubs and as readers specifically to develop, increase, and maintain important cultural capital.

My research contributes to cultural sociology and the sociology of sex and gender by expanding the notion of erotic capital and sexual fields. Previous research examined sexual fields as specific niche environments, like fetish subcultures, but my research demonstrates that sexual fields are relevant throughout social interactions for the women I interviewed. I argue that the sexual fields, particularly for individuals in normalized heterosexual contexts, exist not only in unique sexual environments but also influences social interactions and in day-to-day life. In this sense, this dissertation serves to examine how women were "playing the field" even when participating in expressly non-sexual situations, such as book club meetings.

This study also examines how readers construct gender and sexuality. We can identify a number of ways people construct and enact sexuality, but research is only beginning to address how people think about and understand their gender and sexual identities in the context of their reading habits. Even people whose sexualities seem unproblematic and that appear to most conform to standards of normal, authentic, heteronormative sexual identity, struggle with norms of hegemonic masculinity and femininity. Research in the sociology of gender and

sexuality must address constructions, narratives, and understandings of gendered sexuality because gender and sexuality are two of the primary structures around which social life is organized. Sexuality is a defining element of gendered identity in that it is culturally contextual and connected not only with the body, but with ideas, feelings, desires, and identities (Fischer 2006; Seidman 2003; Weeks 2003). Like gender and race, it is a central organizing system in contemporary culture. Sexuality refers not only to sexual orientation but to “culturally defined appropriate sexual tastes, partners, and activities” (Nagel 2003:8). Gender and sexuality are at the core of individual identity. Throughout this dissertation, when I reference *sexual identity*, I am referring not only to a person’s sexual orientation, although orientation is certainly an important piece of sexual identity. *Sexual identity* “is a complex concept that involves biological factors, gender roles, sociocultural influences, and sexual orientation in relation to sexual development” (Edwards and Brooks 1999:49). Sexual identity, then, is a broad term that speaks not only to sexual orientation, but encompasses how people feel about themselves and their sexual behaviors, how and why people have sexual relationships, and what sexuality means to individuals. This dissertation demonstrates how reading can play a role in the construction of women’s sexual identity. Women in Ireland and the United States utilized reading and book club participation to shape desires and gendered sexuality, and to develop erotic capital.

*Gendered sexuality* refers to the ways gender informs and influences sexuality and sexual identity. People experience sexuality and develop sexual identity based on gender (Crane and Seeber 2003), and demonstrate gendered sexuality through

behaviors, attitudes, and desire (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Oliver and Hyde 1993). Gender and sexuality are deeply intertwined and cannot be examined separately from one another, because the concepts themselves, and the way gender and sexuality are embodied and enacted, are fundamentally linked. The women in this study constructed and developed a sense of sexuality that was inherently gendered. Thus, the term *gendered sexuality* provides a clear way to express the co-constructed nature of gender and sexuality.

Finally, this dissertation addresses questions posed by Janice Radway in her influential work *Reading the Romance* (1984). My research adds a comparative dimension to her work, allowing us to examine particular ways women in different social contexts, and reading different kinds of books, engage with and utilize reading and book clubs in their own lives. Unlike Radway's study, the women I interviewed did not identify, first and foremost, as mothers and wives. While many women were, indeed, married and had children, this identity was not central in the interviews I conducted. Thus, my interviewees did not speak of reading as an "escape" from those particular roles, as in Radway's work, but instead discussed reading as a central element of identity formation. Like Radway, I too, considered the empowering and constraining possibilities within women's reading habits. Radway asked,

Does the romance's endless rediscovery of the virtues of a passive female sexuality merely stitch the reader ever more resolutely into the fabric of patriarchal culture? Or, alternatively, does the satisfaction a reader derives from the act of reading itself, an act she chooses, often in explicit defiance of others' opposition, lead to a new sense of strength and independence?" (1991:15).

Radway explained that her work did not answer these questions, but I believe that my work can begin to address these questions. While my research did not revolve specifically around romance reading, all of the women I interviewed had spent considerable time during their lives reading romance novels. However, rather than simply internalizing these patriarchal messages, my interviewees indicated that reading and participation in book clubs served, overall, as agentic, empowering opportunities. Reading and participation in book clubs proved empowering for the women I interviewed because they were able to develop a sense of gendered sexuality and explore the socio-sexual world free from the constraints of interacting in sexual field. Women developed confidence and strong social networks, and were able to rely on one other in ways that many expressed as empowering. While women recognized traditional patriarchal ideals of romance and relationships, tropes often reinforced through women's fiction, they overwhelmingly utilized literature and book clubs to become more confident, independent, explore gendered sexuality, and strengthen their capital in multiple fields.

As JoEllen Shively (1992) demonstrated, texts are used and interpreted differently by those occupying different cultural positions. Thus, I examined two different cultural contexts: Denver, Colorado, in the United States and Dublin, Ireland. In cultural environments that often limit women's open expressions of desire and sexuality, women's book clubs provided an acceptable context in which women publicly discuss and construct sexuality. I focused on American and Irish book clubs in order to understand how women construct gendered sexuality in

different cultural contexts through reading, group discussions and interactions at women's book club meetings.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

My research seeks to answer the following research questions to address gendered sexual identity and understand how American and Irish women utilized reading and participation in women's book clubs in their own lives: Do contemporary women's book clubs provide a space for women to negotiate their gender and sexual identities? Do women's experiences with popular women's fiction, particularly in the context of women's book clubs, generate empowerment? Conversely, do these experiences perpetuate patriarchal, heterosexist ideologies? Most importantly, how do experiences with reading and book clubs vary culturally for American and Irish women?

I compared participation in American and Irish book clubs and interviews with members to understand how women develop a sense of identity, navigate the social world, and construct their own gendered sexuality. My research shows that book clubs have a potential to subvert dominant notions of gendered sexuality because women met to talk with one another about their experiences as readers and to question the patriarchal structures under which women construct identity. Alternatively, as contemporary women's fiction is frequently steeped in heteronormative ideologies, book clubs often simultaneously served to reinforce conventional sexual norms, thus minimizing the political and empowering possibilities of book clubs. As women work through sociological issues such as

gender, sexuality, the role of family, among many other gendered topics, it is imperative to examine women's book clubs not only because of the political potentiality for social change within reading groups, but to determine how women in different national and thus cultural contexts use fiction to understand their lives.

## READING, MEANING, AND CULTURE

A brief history of reception studies and reader response theory is useful, even though in contemporary cultural studies the importance of reader response is often taken for granted by sociologists and other social scientists (Harkin 2005). Reader response theory and reception studies became more prevalent in academia during the 1970s and 1980s. This new approach responded specifically to earlier twentieth century formalist schools of thought regarding literature and meaning. Formalist approaches, like Russian formalism, focused on scientifically examining the literary elements of texts and understanding specific literary devices to access and identify the objective meaning within texts (Steiner 1984). Stanley Fish, at the forefront of reader response theories, argued that the subjective position of readers, and the communities in which they participate, are important in understanding textual meaning (Fish 1980). This new critical school no longer focused on the relationship between the author and the text, and instead argued that reader reception was as important as the production of literature, thus placing a new emphasis on the role of the reader. Because readers fill in gaps in texts with their own preexisting knowledge, experiences with texts can also lead



readers to examine their social status, norms, and assumptions about the world (Iser 1980).

Umberto Eco argued that interpretation is important and possible for readers, but not indefinite because words and sentences have a given number of possibilities of meaning. Eco referenced texts as “lazy machinery” that require the reader to do the work (1981:36). In this process of interpretation, he argued, readers add to a text’s meaning when they engage in textual interpretation. In reader response theory and reception studies, the reader becomes the authority, rather than the author, the literary elements, or the text itself (Harkin 2005). Texts, then, are not objects with specific meaning to be gleaned by readers. This style of literary analysis contends that the experience of a reader and the meaning constructed by the reader is integral to literature. Meaning-making continually takes place every time a book is read, and is different for readers in different sociocultural contexts. For example, in contemporary culture, where reading remains prevalent, especially among women, it is not enough to know what an author wants to get across in his or her writing, nor is it enough to examine word use, metaphors, syntax, or style. Thus, we look to reception studies and reader response theories that demonstrate not only how people make meaning through literary consumption, but also the potential for individual and social change through literature. Consequently, cultural scholars should engage in dialogue with readers to understand how they are utilizing literature and what benefits they glean from literature consumption. Contemporary sociologists must continue to study reception and reader response studies to examine not only the act of reading itself,

but also how readers use texts to interact with the world and create meaning and understanding throughout their everyday lives.

Indeed, readers are not passive recipients; readers construct, conceptualize, and interpret literary works. As Allington (2011) notes, reading and interpretation are a set of “complex social practices” (329) whereby cultural norms and constraints strongly affect reader response (Griswold 1987; Griswold et al. 2005; Radway 1983). Cultural objects, such as novels, work as “tools” people utilize in order to make sense of and negotiate their experiences (Swidler 1986); readers “feel entitled to use fictional portrayals as a basis for their own assertions about society” (DeVault 1990:892).

Likewise, literature is not simply a reflection or a mirror, but an important element in the production of culture (Long 1985). People consume literature within a “horizon of expectations,” and cultural elements influence reader response (Jauss 1982). Readers seek associations to link reading to their own lives and experiences; thus literature and society shape one another (Desan et al. 1989). For example, interpretations of texts are collective and gendered (Crane 1999; DeVault 1990), as well as influenced by race, class, and socioeconomic status (Howard and Allen 1990). Thus, how readers construct meaning and experience and utilize texts is invariably influenced by their own specific cultural context and social position. Rather than seeing literature as reflective, sociologists examine how literature is part of the social order and linked to cultural values and expectations (Shively 1992; Viala 1989). We cannot presuppose what people get out of texts simply through

analyzing books; therefore, the importance of sociocultural context cannot be overstated in examining how and why people read and interpret literature.

In the years since Janice Radway's pivotal work, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (1984), new genres emerged in women's fiction that differ significantly from the romance novels she examined, and women's book clubs became more popular (Konchar Farr 2004). While exhaustive counts of all active book clubs worldwide do not exist, research estimates there are more than 50,000 book clubs in the UK and over 500,000 book clubs in the United States alone (Hartley 2002; Konchar Farr 2004). Surveys indicate that women read far more fiction than men, and consume about 80% of the contemporary fiction on the market.<sup>2</sup> Clearly, women's literary consumption is important, both within the field of literature and in the publishing industry, leading one author to lament, "Reading groups, readings, breakdowns of book sales all tell the same story: when women stop reading, the novel will be dead."<sup>3</sup>

Contemporary work in cultural sociology focuses on the social nature of reading. Reading groups have long existed, but a growth in popularity began in the mid-1990s, perhaps fueled by major celebrity endorsements of book clubs reminding readers how valuable reading is in contemporary society (Griswold et al. 2005). In fact, Oprah's book club was so popular, it continued after a brief hiatus when her talk show ended. Now readers can access Ms. Winfrey's margin notes, listen to audio clips from authors, and participate in social media conversations

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, "Why Women Read More Than Men" <http://www.npr.org/story/story.php?storyId=14175229>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/sep/20/fiction.features11>

about the book club choices.<sup>4</sup> Recent studies of book clubs show that 64% or more book club members are part of all-women groups, while only 4% are all-male groups, with remaining book clubs reporting coed membership (Hartley and Turvey 2001; Long 2003). Adult women are highly represented as readers in that women read more than men, overall (Rogers 1991). Early childhood gender socialization may explain the origins of this difference, as girls are encouraged to participate in passive, quiet activities such as reading (Griswold 1993). Studies of high school adolescents point to the importance of book clubs in identity development and exploring one's social world. Readers use texts, and in particular, elements of texts discussed extensively with other members of book clubs, to understand their day-to-day interactions and relationships, including friendships and romantic attachments (Polleck 2010; Sengupta 2008). Book clubs provide ways for groups within contemporary society to define themselves and their identities. In this way, women can contextualize their experiences within a larger framework of understanding the world, influenced by both the texts they read and the conversations they have with other book club members.

Reading is an interpretive activity that is inherently social. Elizabeth Long's (2003) study of Houston women's book clubs found that group members sought the social element of book clubs to fulfill their interests, expressed by many as a "need," in "intelligent" conversation with like-minded and well-educated women. Book clubs can serve as a source of cultural authority. For some groups, important

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<sup>4</sup> See "The Return of Oprah's Book Club," *The New York Times* <http://mediadecoder.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/06/01/the-return-of-the-oprahs-book-club/> and Oprah's Book Club 2.0 <http://www.oprah.com/app/books.html>

distinctions were made in labeling their book club “serious” and linking their club to high culture in contrast with less prestigious literature. As I will discuss in chapter four, participation in book clubs often provided a way to increase the cultural capital, important symbolic social resources linked to status, of members. Other readers utilized book clubs as a form of critique of the traditional literary canon, though Long (2003) noted that these women often have higher levels of education, income, and cultural capital than readers who neither focus specifically on “high- or low-brow” works. As Long’s research demonstrated, book clubs can provide room to challenge longstanding cultural norms; yet, book clubs can also serve to reinforce social inequality.

The sociology of literature examined the theater as “a testing ground and a judgment place where new social behaviors are tried out and sanctioned” (Apostolides 1989:111). I argue that book clubs play a role similar to that of the theater: readers can use interactions and discussions of themes and meanings as an analogous sort of testing ground. Book club members are able to “test out” new ways of thinking about desire and sexuality through the frame of literature. Meaning lies not only in written text, but is created both in the process of reading and in discussing books. The cultural object of women’s fiction is relevant to this project. However, more important is what happened when women utilized what they were reading in their own construction of identity and how group interactions formed the basis for ways in which readers constructed conceptualizations of desire and sexuality when women came together to talk about themes within the literature they read.

## FIELDS, CAPITAL, AND HABITUS

This dissertation is largely informed by the work of Pierre Bourdieu.

Bourdieu's (1984, 1993) work examined the way we enact and reproduce social and class inequality, but his work did not examine sexuality. Still, Bourdieu's concepts of capital and habitus work together in daily lives and are seen in our practices. Before applying the theoretical work of Bourdieu to sexuality, I will examine the main elements of his explanations of capital, habitus, and fields, as these concepts are utilized throughout this dissertation. I will briefly discuss social and cultural capital, and will address these concepts again in subsequent chapters.

Bourdieu developed an analysis of *fields* as particular social settings in which power and inequality play out. A field can be understood as a sort of social environment, such as the field of the economy, or culture, in which different people have different access, based on levels of *capital* within a particular field. Fields have differing rules, and knowledge of the rules, as well as power within a particular field, is linked to capital. Bourdieu explained that capital (speaking here of cultural capital) can be conceptualized as follows:

Capital is accumulated labor (in its materialized form or its "incorporated," embodied form), which, when appropriated on a private, i.e., exclusive, basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labor. It is a *vis insita*, a force inscribed in objective or subjective structures, but it is also a *lex insita*, the principle underlying the immanent regularities of the social world... Cultural capital can exist in three forms: in the *embodied* state, i.e., in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body; in the *objectified* state, in the form of cultural goods (pictures, books, dictionaries, instruments, machines, etc.), which are the trace or realization of theories or critiques of these

theories, problematics, etc.; and in the *institutionalized* state, a form of objectification which must be set apart because, as will be seen in the case of educational qualifications, it confers entirely original properties on the cultural capital which it is presumed to guarantee. (2013:168-169).

*Capital*, then, references field-specific resources, or the degree to which one knows the dominant codes of a specific field. Capital is an important element of day-to-day social life; it plays an important role in actions and interactions, and is demonstrated through cultural consumption. Capital is most beneficial to people who already hold high levels of capital because those with the highest capital are able to attain the highest rewards of a given field.

*Social capital* can be conceptualized as social networks, and this form of capital is important across cultures worldwide (Marsden and Gorman 2001; Lin 1999; Portes 1998). Social capital is also a major factor in educational attainment, mental and physical health and overall well-being (House et al. 1988; Lin and Peek 1999; Pescosolido and Levy 2002; Putnam 2000; Smith and Christakis 2008). Moreover, social integration and connections are important, and high levels of social capital allowed book club members to develop and maintain important positions in the social field.

*Cultural capital* refers to knowledge and access to dominant cultural codes. Knowing what is valued culturally or considered culturally legitimate are examples of cultural capital. People often discuss “tastes” in music, art, or literature, and considerations of taste are inherently discussions demonstrating cultural capital, and placing oneself in the cultural field (Bennett et al. 2009; Bourdieu 1984; DiMaggio 1987; Erikson 1996; Lamont 1992). Different forms of capital often work

in conjunction to increase one's overall capital. They are interconvertible, which means that capital in one field, such as economic capital, can be converted to a different form of capital, such as cultural capital (Brubaker 1985; Green 2013). Bourdieu's work demonstrates how class inequality is reproduced – for example, students with financial resources, or higher economic capital, are able to attend prestigious schools and attain higher cultural and social capital. While capital and class are not the same, they are intrinsically linked because access to economic capital provides greater access to social and cultural capital. The book club members I interviewed were aware of the value of status associated with reading, and pursued potential capital attainment through reading and participation in book clubs.

*Habitus*, Bourdieu explained, is an internalization of the conditions of a particular field (1984). *Habitus* is one's way of being in the world. It includes values, activities, dispositions, and tastes. *Habitus*, in conjunction with capital, generates our practices (Lizardo 2004). *Habitus* is not simply something we do, rather, it is so deeply internalized in our day-to-day actions that it can seem to signify who we are, as it encompasses so much - our behaviors, actions, social companions, ways of being and speaking, our hobbies, education, among others. Identity as a reader was a central element of the *habitus* for the American and Irish women I interviewed. *Habitus*, like capital, is inherently linked to race, class, gender, and sexuality; *habitus* is seen in our very personalities, and demonstrates our level of capital and our position in various fields.



## THE SEXUAL FIELD

Reading and participation in book clubs were important in constructing sexuality for the women I interviewed. Women utilized reading to construct a sense of self and explore the sexual world around them. Reading is thus inherently linked to sexuality for lifelong readers. In this dissertation, I expand the notion of erotic capital and sexual fields. While I will discuss this further in chapter five, my central argument in this regard is that sexual fields are not only found in specific, niche scenes, as they have often been studied. Instead, the sexual field is at work in the background of many social interactions, especially for participants in normalized heterosexual contexts.

Martin and George (2006) examined the possibility of sexual desire as existing within the sexual field. Previous research examined the sexual market as a way to conceptualize desire – people have differing value in the sexual market based on level of attractiveness, and sexual interaction occurs as a competitive exchange based on this attractiveness (Collins 1971; Davis 1966; Laumann et al. 1994; Posner 1992). There are disadvantages to the commonly utilized market-based approach to sexuality, namely, a market-based approach does not leave room for the importance or meaning of many elements, besides physical attraction, that are at play in attraction between or among individuals. Indeed, sexual desiring is not based simply on “singular bodily attractiveness” (Martin and George 2006:116). Desire, instead, is a result of a combination of a number of social and socially organizing factors. The sexual field does not exist in a vacuum outside the social world, or separate from cultural and social fields, but is a “set of interlocking institutions”

(Martin and George 2006:124). In order to “play” the sexual field, people must have an understanding of the structure of the field itself. This means within the sexual field, actors must know what is desirable, how it is desirable, and where they fit into a particular sexual field (Green 2011), wherein capital provides objective structure but is subjectively practiced. Desires are constructed and effected by the sexual field, and are considered *field effects* in that the sexual field, and experiences therein, shape desires (Green 2013). In Ireland and in the United States, women learned about and determined where they fit in the sexual field through reading and conversations at book club, ostensibly outside the sexual field.

*Erotic capital* is a person’s location in the social-sexual structure. It includes desirability within a sexual field as well as knowledge about the sexual field itself. One’s level of erotic capital is often used in conjunction with additional forms of capital. For example, high levels of social capital, or popularity, can increase one’s erotic capital. Erotic capital varies by field, and is thus a characteristic of a field, not a characteristic of an individual (Green 2013). As gender and sexuality are socially constructed, desirability is collectively defined (Martin 2004). Desires are shaped by the social and collective construction of sexuality, namely, through popularity and through socialization. People who are considered desirable experience an increase in popularity. Thus, people who are popular and socially seen as desirable become more desirable within the sexual field, and people who are less popular remain less popular within the sexual field (Green 2013). Of course, these levels are relative to the popularity and desirability of others – one may be very desirable in one context and not desirable in another. In this way, we can see how sexual fields

simultaneously construct and reflect desire and desirability. The women I interviewed consistently negotiated their own places in the sexual field, constructed a sense of desirable femininity, and relied on reading and book club meetings to construct and reinforce their concepts of gendered sexuality.

Individuals bring their own preexisting desires and concepts of what is desirable into the sexual field, but over time, as they learn about the sexual field and develop erotic capital, people begin to desire that which is most desirable within the sexual fields in which they play. This means that people learn what is desirable based on experiences in a particular sexual field. For example, behaviors, clothing, and physical actions considered desirable, and thus indicative of high erotic capital, at a college fraternity party are not the same as high erotic capital in a lesbian biker bar. This brings to mind Waller's (1937) research about "rating and dating" among college students. Waller's work demonstrated that students were more likely to be attracted to popular students, and popular students experienced more positive feedback in the dating scene. Waller explained, "here, as nowhere else, nothing succeeds like success" (1937:730). Waller was writing long before the development of sexual field theories, but his words ring true, nonetheless. Perceptions of popularity and attraction are integral to the sexual field, but are also relative to a specific field.

Experience in a particular field allows people to develop erotic capital in that field, and internalize elements of desirability into *erotic habitus*. One's actions and positionality in the sexual field are referred to as *erotic habitus*. Desire and sexuality become internalized into erotic habitus; erotic habitus encompasses bodies, affects,

ways of interacting and being within the sexual field, as well as knowledge and understanding of sexual scripts. The women I interviewed were signifying their erotic habitus and navigating the sexual field through their engagement with reading and participation in book clubs. Thus, I argue that women's book club members increased social, cultural, and erotic capital while demonstrating their erotic habitus both in and out of the sexual field, in multiple ways through their reading activities and participation in book clubs. This dissertation adds to our understanding of the sexual field by exploring the ways women increased their erotic habitus outside of the sexual field for increased erotic capital within the sexual field. A lifetime of reading and adult participation in book clubs allowed women to build unique capital portfolios and thus demonstrate habitus that benefitted them in multiple fields.

## BOOK CLUB OVERVIEW

In subsequent chapters, I will examine my research methods and my findings; first I will provide an overview of the book clubs I attended.<sup>5</sup> Overall, women in both countries attended book club meetings in an open and casual way. Women dressed in jeans and blouses or sweaters, or if women attended a meeting right after work, they arrived in their workplace attire. Meetings took place at restaurants, pubs, or in the homes of club members. The restaurants and bars at which clubs met were mid-range in price, but not extravagant. Over the course of

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<sup>5</sup> Pseudonyms are used for all book club and participant names.

my research, I was able to attend many meetings of four book clubs in Denver, and meetings of five book clubs in Dublin.<sup>6</sup>

### *Girls Read - Denver*

Girls Read was by far the largest book club I attended, and was one branch of an international women's book club with 14 clubs meeting worldwide, from Denver to London. At the Denver Girls Read meetings, there were often more than 40 women in attendance, and even in very bad weather there were more than 25 members in attendance. This club consisted primarily of women in their late twenties to late thirties who met monthly at a popular bar or restaurant. Women arrived to book club early to take advantage of happy hour specials and ensure their food was ordered before the book club meeting officially began. Because the group was so large, the group leader provided a list of questions to a few smaller groups for which individual women agreed to lead discussions. At the end of each discussion, the main book club leader called the group to attention, and each smaller group summarized their main ideas about the book for that particular month. Over the course of the 11 club meetings I attended, the group leader worked to find a location that could accommodate a growing attendance and was accessible for members with disabilities, as the initial location required going down stairs to a meeting room at a local sushi restaurant. The first several meetings I attended took place at a forest-themed bar, and women sat at large tables made of reclaimed wood, on benches and stools fashioned to look like tree stumps. One meeting took

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<sup>6</sup> Please see Appendix A for a list of books read by each book club I attended.

place at a crowded pizza restaurant, and in this instance, the smaller subgroups had to split up into different sections of the restaurant, thus making the final group discussion difficult. At the end of that meeting, women spilled out of the restaurant onto the sidewalk out front and continued their discussions until the frigid January weather became unbearable. After that meeting, the group leader secured a private room at a restaurant and bar in which the group split into two or three smaller groups of 15-25 women each at large tables arranged in an L-shape so that the groups could hear the conversations of other groups, and the space was much more conducive to the wrap-up discussions of the entire group together. The group continues to meet in that space monthly.

#### *Women, Reading, and Wine - Denver*

Women, Reading and Wine was a longstanding book club with several regular members and additional members who attended from time to time. Each woman in the group arrived to the meeting with a snack and/or a bottle of wine, and women generally tried to match the “theme” of the books with the food and drinks they provided. Club members ranged in age from 29 to 65, with varying relationship statuses. I attended six meetings of this book club, after which one of the club members indicated that she no longer felt comfortable participating in my research, or having the group conversations recorded. She explained that she was still comfortable with my attending book club meetings, and I attended eight additional meetings without recording those club meetings for my research, as she was in attendance. Women, Reading, and Wine met at the home of the most affluent

member in the group. Her home was on five acres near the mountain suburbs outside of Denver, and consisted of a massive great room with vaulted ceilings and floor to ceiling windows with mountain views. This home had a custom library with built in bookshelves, window seats, and a cozy fireplace, as well as a second library in the master bedroom sitting room. The group met, for the most part, in the great room in front of the marble fireplace, and the annual Christmas party was especially festive in front of the 20 foot Christmas tree in front of those windows. When the weather allowed, the book club met on the expansive back patio, with a stream and waterfall trickling through the patio stonework. The woman who owned the home, and was a co-founder of the book club, often provided tours when new members asked about the home. I joined the group on three of those tours, and for the most part, members provided compliments about the gorgeous woodwork and the custom tiling done throughout the home, and expressed particular fondness for the main floor library. While this home was unique in the book clubs I attended at members' homes, club members themselves were all upper-middle class women, and often chimed in with discussions about their own kitchen remodels, or home expansions. On one occasion, a member brought along a friend, and explained to me that she had attended on and off over the previous year. On this particular evening, the host provided a home tour, and this woman behaved quite differently than the other members. She asked the woman who owned the home how much the kinds of renovations she recently completed cost, and talked a great deal about how much money it must take to live in that sort of home. This member also "claimed" rooms and exclaimed that she wanted to live in one of the wings of the home, and at this,

the other members laughed and agreed, discussing which bedroom and bathroom they liked the most. Throughout the evening, the woman mentioned finances, often discussing the efforts she and her husband were making to pay off their cars and minimize their credit card debt so they could purchase a larger home. She asked other members how much they spent on the wine they brought to the meeting, and asked the homeowner how much the wine in her wine cellar was worth. Once the meeting began, she made occasional comments about finances, and it seemed that she was uncomfortable in such an extravagant home. She introduced herself to me as a regular member, but I did not observe her in attendance at any of the subsequent meetings I attended. While some of the other women in the group may not have been in the same income bracket as the book club host, many mentioned their vacation homes or mountain condominiums during book club discussion, and with the exception of the previously discussed member, class-based privileges seemed to be taken for granted among the group.

Each month the leader used a list of book club questions to prompt discussions. Women often had disparate opinions about the books and answers to the discussion questions. Conversations often veered into related topics about which many women disagreed, ranging from political elections to marijuana legalization. Disagreements were not uncommon, but were civil and if anyone began to feel uncomfortable, they simply indicated to the group that they wanted to talk about the book. This group often compared the current book to books they read previously, and regularly mentioned possibilities to read for future club meetings. If



the conversations veered too far off course, the club leader brought the discussion back to the book, and club meetings generally lasted about four hours.

#### *Denver Book Group A*

One of the book clubs I attended was a group of ten women who had been friends or acquaintances for many years. Three of the women decided to form their own book club in 2006, and by 2010 it had grown to 12 regular members, with 10 women generally in attendance from month to month. These women were all in their thirties, and most were married or in a long term relationship. This group met at the home of a different member each month, and the hosting member provided a meal theme to the group via an email list in advance of the meeting. Members signed up on the online page and indicated the food they would bring, as well as carefully indicated any potential allergens in the food. Each month the hosting member provided the main dish, and the meeting began with a potluck style dinner. Women arrived over the course of a half an hour, and each woman brought a homemade dish to share. Some meetings took place at a dining table, and others on chairs around the living room of the hosting member, depending on the space available. Meetings took place in the evenings, and some members provided wine and nonalcoholic beverages, as several members of the group had small children and were breastfeeding and thus did not want to consume alcohol. The women hosting the groups often apologized for their “messy” homes, but each home appeared clean and tidy, even if there were occasional children’s toys strewn about in playrooms or on kitchen floors. Club members spent a half an hour to an hour at the beginning of

each meeting catching up, talking to one another about their families and their lives, and often expressed great relief at taking a break away from their young children to focus on themselves, even if they had not had time to read that month's book club selection. When this group discussed the books they read, they took turns talking about points they each wanted to cover, and did not utilize a list of questions, and a particular club member did not lead the discussion.

### *Denver Book Group B*

One of the women in Girls Read was a member of two book clubs, and she asked her additional book club if they would feel comfortable with me attending a club meeting. The women were welcoming and included me in their online communications with details about the meeting. I attended one of their book club meetings at a Denver coffee shop on a cold February Saturday morning. The women in this club had developed friendships with one another during college and graduate school, and they decided to start a book club when they realized their lives were making the maintenance of those connections more difficult. These women were in their mid-thirties and early-forties, dressed casually, and genuinely seemed to enjoy one another's company. Six of the club members were married, one was engaged, and two were in long-term relationships. These friends talked and laughed and chatted easily, ordering pastries to share while catching up about families and jobs and the recent holidays. This group was unique in my research in that each of the club members knew one another in a context prior to attending book club, and it made for a particularly easy-going communication style among the club members.

### *Dublin Readers*

A newly single woman who wanted to find a way to meet new friends after a break-up with her long-term boyfriend started Dublin Readers in early 2011. She created the club on a popular social network website, and made the club open to anyone who wanted to attend. At first, the group was co-ed, but she decided to create a second book club for women only, and continued running both clubs. In this club, women met at a popular local book-themed pub called The Library. As I discuss further in the next chapter, this location served as the perfect locale for a majority of my interviews in Ireland, and the ten Dublin Readers book club members congregated on rickety, plush velvet chairs, low to the ground, around a coffee table. This location was the most coveted seat in the pub, as it was in front of the fireplace, and thus felt intimate even amidst a bustling crowd, as if the group was gathered in someone's living room. Each meeting, they told me, one of the club members agreed to arrive very early to save the spot before the evening crowds spilled in. Every January the women this group signed up for a month or two of the following year during which they were responsible for choosing the book for the group to read, and guiding discussion. At the meeting I attended, the women arrived after work over the course of an hour, and during this time the members in attendance ordered coffee, wine, or beer, and made small talk with one another about how they had been since the prior meeting. Women in this group did not exchange a great deal of personal information with one another, and discussions about life since the previous meeting were relatively superficial. Once everyone on the RSVP list arrived, the club began, and the women conversed with one another

based on the prompts provided by the discussion leader. At first, conversations seemed a bit hesitant, but after the first question or two had been asked, the women became more at ease with one another, and they did not strictly follow the question and answer format. After an hour, the group began discussing the book assigned for the following month, and over the next half an hour women began leaving one by one. Club members told me they scheduled a yearly holiday party for the club on a weekend, which they always started with a discussion of a holiday-themed book and a book exchange, and which often ended when The Library closed for the night.

#### *Dublin Women's Reading Club*

One of my interviewees, Lisa, began this book club when she started a new job in Dublin in 2012 and found herself losing contact with two of her daily workplace acquaintances. These women each invited friends or coworkers, and a group of seven women met regularly. Occasionally, they told me, one of the women would bring a friend to a club meeting, and two regular members had moved away in the previous few months. This group was open and friendly, and even rescheduled their early-September club meeting to late August so that I could attend two of their book club meetings. The club met at various downtown Dublin restaurants, and each woman arrived to book club directly from work. The women in this book club were in their early thirties, two were married, one was engaged, two had boyfriends, and two were single. At the beginning of the meeting, members talked about their lives, and commiserated about the Dublin housing market, as one club member was hoping to purchase a home but worried she could not afford to

buy in the desirable neighborhood in which she currently rented. Women joked about visiting one another in dilapidated terrace-houses along the train tracks, or driving two hours to the country, and eventually agreed that it was better to rent in a sought-after neighborhood than to purchase in a downtrodden part of town, for both resale value and for the social implications attached to living in a “bad” part of town. Each meeting the group ordered several menu items to share, and when food ran out, women ordered more of what had been the most popular on the table until everyone agreed they had eaten enough. Throughout the evening, the women engaged in conversations about the book they read for the meeting. Often, two or three conversations took place at once, and club members filled in the larger group about their conversation, which prompted further discussion among the entire group. Club members were not hesitant about disagreeing with one another, but even women who did not like the book they read found common ground with the women who enjoyed the book. This group stayed at their table for hours, during the course of which discussion about the book was woven into overall discussions about life, family, and work. At the end of each meeting, club members offered to walk with me to my bus stop and waited with me until my bus arrived.

#### *Dublin Book Group A*

One of the women I interviewed in Dublin told me that she founded a book club, and she invited me to her home to attend a club meeting. When she started the club in 2010, she told a few friends and asked them to tell any women they thought might be interested, and the book club attendance had grown from about eight

members in the beginning to 14 in 2013. This group of women met every month, often at the home of the founding member who lived about 20 minutes outside the city center. Sometimes, depending on work and travel schedules, the club met at the home of another member or at a restaurant. When I attended the first meeting early in August, there were 13 members in attendance. At the beginning of the meeting, club members discussed subsequent meetings, and attempted to schedule their September meeting. They realized that many of them were traveling early in September, and offered to schedule a meeting for the end of August so that I could attend another meeting. Unfortunately, many of the members had weddings to attend during the last two weeks of August, and the group was unable to schedule a meeting for more than one or two people, so towards the end of August they decided to skip September's meeting and begin meeting again in October. These women met all brought snacks and wine to the meeting, and after about an hour, they decided to order takeout from a local Indian restaurant, and each woman put cash on the table to pay for the food. The club founder's husband was spending time in the house with two of the boyfriends of club members during the meeting, and they went to pick up food, joking that they didn't want to hear what was going on at book club. All of the club members were in their thirties, and they openly shared with one another about their lives since the previous meeting. The member hosting the meeting had recently purchased her home, and the meetings were thus farther from the city center than in previous times, but the club members agreed it was worth the commute to be able to afford a newly built, detached home with top of the line appliances and amenities. One of the members announced her pregnancy, and

the group spent a good deal of time debating whether she would have a girl or a boy and teasing her about twins in her future. The expectation for the group to continue meeting long term was clear, as the women talked about eventually sharing hand-me-downs, baby clothes, and supplies with one another when they all started having children. None of the women expressed that they did not want to have children, but many did say they were not quite ready to change their lifestyles just yet, and mentioned the ease with which they could go out for dinner or purchase new clothes. Once dinner arrived, club members made up their plates and went to the living room, where they sat gathered around on the couch and on the floor, and began talking about the books. The club founder had a list of book club questions she found online, and they started working through the list to address the club prompts. As the conversation picked up, they did not strictly rely on the list, but talked back and forth. This group met on a Friday evening, and the club meeting lasted for several hours, until everyone decided it was time to call it a night, and one woman offered to drive two members home because they had been drinking. This group was rambunctious and friendly, and appeared to enjoy the stress-free atmosphere of their book club meeting.

#### *Dublin Book Group B*

I found that I had many chance encounters during my intense month of book and book club related activities in Dublin. One evening I visited one of the pubs recommended by several of the women I'd met in interviews and at book club. A group of three women seated next to me at the bar began a conversation with me

when they heard my American accent, and they were all thrilled to hear about my research trip to Ireland because it turned out they each attended book clubs regularly. One of the women offered to meet me for an interview, and mentioned that she attended a monthly book club at a well-known Dublin bookstore. She recommended I contact the bookstore to find out if I could attend a meeting, because the clubs there were popular and always had a waiting list. The club coordinator was open to my attending, and two weeks later I attended one of their book club meetings. This women's reading group met in the late afternoon in a room at the back of the store. Club membership was limited to 15 attendees due to the space constraints, and this particular group was one of several book clubs hosted at the bookstore. The coordinator also ran the club meeting, and provided tea and coffee for club members. Another club member arrived with a box of small pastries, and each woman took a pastry and a cup of tea or coffee before they sat down. Each month a club member was assigned to lead the discussion, and the group engaged a conversation around a list of questions about the book. This group ranged in age from early thirties to mid sixties, and did not appear to be acquaintances outside of book club. This was unique in the clubs that I attended, in that members did not have the same easy rapport with one another, although several had been attending the monthly book group for years. Conversation, though, was not difficult and women appeared comfortable talking about dissenting opinions, but it was clear that this particular group of women did not know one another in any context besides book club. At the end of a two-hour period, the group discussed final thoughts about the book and the book club coordinator assigned a book for the



following month. Women walked with one another to their bus and Luas light rail stops, waving goodbye to one another, and then headed back to their everyday routines.

### *Dublin Book Group C*

This small group of eight women, ranging in age from early forties to late fifties, met for brunch every month at the home of the founding member. The location was a relatively affluent neighborhood near Phoenix Park, an expansive urban park of more than 1700 acres in northeast Dublin. The women gathered in an enclosed sunroom overlooking a neatly landscaped yard with a pond and many flowers, with laundry hanging from the clothesline along the side wall. Because the group had been meeting regularly for some time, members were comfortable speaking with one another about home renovations, families, and work. Two of the women were planning major home renovations because their children were older and not around as often, and they exchanged information about trustworthy contractors. The woman hosting the meeting explained that her daughter was newly engaged, and the group spent some time talking about how to transform the sun room and back yard area into an elegant setting for a bridal shower the following spring. The women brought scones and baked goods, and the hosting member provided a baked egg dish, coffee, tea, and juice. They told me that they began meeting in 2004 over a lunch hour at work, but as jobs and lives changed and members moved into different parts of the city, they decided to schedule a monthly brunch date, and they all felt very committed to attending every month, barring

unforeseen circumstances. Each woman brought a copy of the book with notes in the margins and they took turns going around the table talking about their thoughts about the book, and overall impressions. Once each woman shared her opinions of the book, they did the same for questions – one member would pose a question, or bring up something she was not sure she understood, and the group went around the table discussing their thoughts on the topic. After about two hours, the women determined a time and a book for the subsequent meeting and helped clear the table. Three of the women discussed attending a play together in the near future, and all of the women joked with one another about getting back to “reality” as they walked out the front door and to their cars. This particular group was low-key and not as opinionated or raucous as some of the other groups I attended, and I did not witness disagreement among members throughout the discussion.

## DISSERTATION OVERVIEW

In chapter two, I explain my methodological approaches, namely ethnography and the use of narrative interviews. These methods allowed me to uncover reader strategies for incorporating fictional narratives into their own narratives. Chapter three addresses women’s reading and women’s reading groups, both historically and contemporarily, with particular attention paid to the link between book clubs and social capital. Chapter four examines cultural capital, status, and boundary work women undertake through reading and participating in reading groups. Chapter five examines how women develop their own gendered sexual identity and discusses the gendered erotic habitus of book club members.

Additionally, chapter five explores the influence of reading in developing sexual identity for women in the United States and Ireland. Through this international comparison of American and Irish women's book clubs, I will examine the ways differences in cultural conventions about sexuality and desire in the United States and Ireland translate into different narratives of desire and sexual identity, as well as how women in both countries utilize reading and book club membership to develop important social, cultural, and erotic capital.

## **CHAPTER 2 METHODOLOGY**

This dissertation research explored sexuality and identity for American and Irish women's book club members utilizing a mixed-methodological approach to analyzing readers' relationships to fiction as a mechanism for understanding gendered sexual identity. My primary approaches to understanding book club members were ethnographic field research and narrative interviews. Before beginning any research, I received approval from the Office for Human Research Protections at the University of Kansas for this project, HSCL #20100. Throughout my research, and before implementing any changes to my recruiting approaches, I obtained continuing approval for this project and any changes therein.

I was particularly interested in examining sexuality and sexual identity in developing my research questions for this dissertation. Prior to beginning this project, I conducted a pilot study (approved by the Human Subjects Committee in 2010, HSCL #18696) entitled "Narrative Constructions of Sexuality" to identify themes that might be useful in further developing research for my dissertation. The pilot study focused on the cultural elements that women utilized to define and construct narratives about their own sexuality. After completing the pilot study, I recognized that I wanted to continue to focus on the significance of narratives of sexuality within the larger sociological frameworks of gender, sexuality, and culture. Therefore, I developed my research questions to relate to the narratives people tell about their sexuality, and at the same time, how sexuality may shape the construction of life narratives. Additionally, my research interests included a focus

on the ways culture and sexuality are interrelated. As I conducted my research with a specific focus on gendered sexuality, additional themes emerged such as social capital, cultural capital, and status. As such, these emergent themes necessarily expanded the scope of my dissertation research.

The combination of ethnographic fieldwork and in-depth narrative interviews with women from book clubs allowed me to delve deeper into issues of identity development and sexuality throughout my research. This process allowed participants the opportunity to think about and tell me their stories in a personally meaningful way. In this chapter, I will discuss the methodological choices and processes in which I engaged over the course of my research, including site selection, attending book club meetings to conduct ethnographic fieldwork, and conducting in-depth narrative interviews with women in the United States and in Ireland.

## SITE SELECTION

For this research, I chose to study book clubs in Denver, Colorado and in Dublin, Ireland. Denver has a population of about 634,265.<sup>7</sup> Dublin, as the largest city in Ireland, has a much larger population of 1.2 million people.<sup>8</sup> Despite the difference in population size, I selected these sites due to some specific commonalities between the regions. About half of all adults in Denver and Dublin are women. In both rural Ireland and rural Colorado, men outnumber women in the population, thus it was necessary to locate city centers with similar percentages of

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<sup>7</sup> All Denver population data is from the US Census Bureau: <http://www.census.gov>

<sup>8</sup> All Dublin population data is from the Central Statistics Office of Ireland: <http://census.cso.ie>

men and women. Importantly, about 54% of women in Denver and 56% of women in Dublin are unmarried. This is particularly relevant because in both cities the unmarried population is higher than in other regions within these countries (more so in Ireland, where 60% of women in the country over the age of 25 are married). The population of unmarried adult women remains a key demographic in publishing women's fiction, so these locations provided particularly useful insight.

There are significant demographic differences between Dublin and Denver, particularly with regard to differences in religious makeup and in ethnic diversity. The vast majority of Ireland, 89%, identifies as Catholic. Only half of Denver residents identify as religious, and of religious individuals, about half of the population is Catholic. Denver is far more racially and ethnically diverse than Dublin. About half of Denver's population identifies primarily as white, while more than 95% of Dublin's population identifies as white/Irish. In approaching my research, I brought with me the assumption that understandings of sexuality and desire vary among groups based on gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and religious identification, even if these groups share common reading patterns. Given the racial, classed, and gendered demographic of women's fiction readers and women's book club members, I studied predominantly white, middle-class women in Denver, Colorado and Dublin, Ireland. In this way, this study "controlled for" race, class and gender in that the research sample did not include confounding variables such as race or education that could potentially play an important role in how women utilized reading and book club participation. Due to the homogeneity of the participants in the study regarding race, class, education, and sexual orientation,

this work reveals some of the ways culture affects constructions of sexuality for white, middle class women.

## BOOK CLUB MEETINGS

Attending book club meetings presented an opportunity to observe discussions among club members about the constructions of gender and sexuality, as well as to identify themes of importance to each group. These meetings provided insight into the topics most relevant to readers of contemporary women's fiction, and they allowed me to examine the ways women talk about their own experiences with literature. In her study comparing three countries' constructions of meaning around works of fiction by a single author, Wendy Griswold explained, "by looking at the construction of cultural meaning to discover what is taken for granted, presupposed, by a group of cultural recipients, one may begin to map the commonsense, shared understandings and ideology of the group" (Griswold 1987:1115). To understand the nuanced experience of consuming and engaging with literature, my attendance at women's book club meetings shed light on the construction and maintenance of shared meanings among club members.

I attended a total of 30 book club meetings in Denver, Colorado and six (6) book club meetings in Dublin, Ireland. I attended club meetings of four different book clubs in the Denver region, and five different book clubs in Ireland. I relied heavily on the use of social media to locate and approach book clubs. I was able to find book clubs and first approach the event organizers about attending in order to conduct my research by utilizing sites like Facebook, MeetUp, Meetup Ireland and

Boards.ie,<sup>9</sup> Initially I approached nine book clubs in Denver. One organizer explained that the club was not interested and another explained that they were a “closed” group and did not allow new members. Three other Denver area women’s book clubs did not respond to my contact attempts. The book club meetings I attended in Denver varied in size, from a small groups of seven or eight women to a group of fifty women.

The largest book club I attended, “Girls Read,” had an expansive member list, and a large number of attendees. Club meetings took place in restaurant event spaces and spread across several tables. As a result, the group as a whole was not able to have large, cohesive conversations, and rather discussed main questions for the book club in smaller groups. These smaller groups were often still relatively large groups of up to twenty at each table. Attendance at Girls Read fluctuated, and while there were a few “regulars,” the club appeared to have a revolving attendance. The variation in the larger group may have also been related to the average age of group members, who tended to be in their early twenties; thus this group consisted of relatively young, highly active members who attended sporadically due to competing time constraints like school, multiple jobs, outdoor activities and the like.

“Women, Reading, and Wine,” another Denver area book club I attended, consisted of a core group of six women, with additional members who attended from time to time. This group was very close-knit, and even when they disagreed about the topics at hand or had discussed polarizing topics, multiple perspectives were expressed fairly freely. Not unlike my experiences in other book clubs, this

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.facebook.com>; <http://www.meetup.com>; <http://www.meetup.ie>; and <http://www.boards.ie>



group did have one highly opinionated member who spoke loudly, often over other book club members. I found this to be a common theme in book club meetings, as well as in interviews. In fact, when I asked women what they disliked or would like to change about book club meetings, many women in the United States and in Ireland expressed a dislike for feeling “steamrolled” in conversation. Some book club members even admitted to checking the RSVP list in advance and avoided meetings if a member they found particularly overbearing was planning to attend. Women explained that, for the most part, even this tension tended to work itself out over time, and that most people were patient with club members who monopolized conversations.

The two additional Denver book clubs I attended were mid-sized groups of about nine to twelve women. These groups met at one another’s homes, as well as at coffee shops and restaurants. These smaller book clubs were originally created by close-knit groups of friends and had a few core members who had been attending for five to eight years. Both groups generally added new members through the invitation of a current member. I located these book clubs through discussions at the larger Girls Read meetings, and these clubs did not rely primarily on Internet usage in the same way Women, Reading, and Wine or Girls Read did. However, both groups had created closed, invite-only Facebook groups for members to discuss upcoming meetings and time changes.

Book club members were very open to my presence at book club meetings, for the most part. Club leaders introduced me to the groups, and I briefly explained my research project. I explained to the groups that I would like to record their

conversations, but made it clear that members were not required to participate in my research in any way. I ensured that all members present were comfortable with me conducting my research at the club meeting, as well as with me recording. When I initially began attending meetings, many club members asked me questions about my own interests in reading, as well as questions about how I planned to utilize my research. I read the books each book club was reading before I attended club meetings, and while I did not provide my opinions about the texts in general, if asked a direct question I participated in the conversations at book club meetings. Over time, I seemed to fit in more naturally with the groups, and group leaders no longer introduced me at the beginning of meetings. When introducing myself to new members I made my own position as a researcher clear, as I wanted to ensure all club members were aware of my project and felt they were participating willingly. I did not often take notes during the meetings, as I did not want members to feel I was intrusive. Occasionally I jotted one or two lines on paper or in my phone, but for the most part, I spent ample time after each book club meeting taking notes about my experiences and interactions at meetings. These field notes, which averaged several hand-written pages, were especially important as relying on audio recordings of book club meetings was occasionally difficult due to the number of people speaking and the general background noises of public meeting spaces.

I did encounter some stumbling blocks throughout my research, although nothing that proved problematic in the research overall. As members got to know me and began to develop trust in me over a few months at one of the book clubs I attended regularly, a club member felt comfortable telling me she no longer wanted

to participate in my research project. She asked that from then on I not record our book club meetings, but expressed to me that she was open to me utilizing the information from previous meetings I recorded. Trust worked to build rapport with book club members, and once members began to see me more as a member of the book club and less as a temporary researcher, our relationship changed. This interaction made me realize that in a group setting, some members might not feel comfortable disagreeing with the group, and so I made every attempt to ensure all club members were open to me continuing my research. If someone seemed hesitant to speak in a club meeting in which I was recording, at any time throughout my months attending book club meetings, I simply turned off the recorder.

I had ample time to conduct interviews in Denver, but because my time in Ireland was limited, I utilized online communication to set up several meetings with book clubs in Dublin. However, it is important to note that my positionality as the wife of an Irish citizen gained me a great deal of entry into book clubs that may not have been as open to including me in their activities if I had contacted them without such connections. The clubs I contacted through Meetup and Boards, the “Dublin Readers” and the “Women’s Reading Club,” did not know of my connections to Ireland, but were very open to my presence at their meetings as well as to scheduling subsequent interviews. These groups were posted and discussed on public Internet forums, so they were accustomed to new attendees at their meetings regularly, although both groups told me I was the first American to attend one of their meetings. Two additional groups I met with were smaller groups of friends who previously decided to conduct book club meetings, and I was introduced to

these members through my sister-in-law, or through former colleagues of my spouse. These connections gave me less of an “outsider” status and I was thus able to attend a few of these small book clubs at member’s homes or in social restaurant settings. I also attended a women’s book club meeting at a well-known Dublin bookstore, coordinated by the store owner, and comprised of women who did not know one another outside of book club. The largest book club I attended, Dublin Readers, had ten members in attendance, and many members were part of multiple book clubs in the area. All book club members in the meetings I attended in Dublin expressed comfort with me recording their conversations, and joked that I would need to record if only to play the recording slow enough to understand their Irish accents. In Dublin, I found club members to be very accommodating, often taking time during meetings to fill me in on the background information about conversations they were having, or books they previously read. I found this very different from my experience in Denver book clubs, but this is likely due to my citizenship status – in American book clubs, it was not unusual for a new American member to show up to a book club, but in Dublin, I was clearly a stranger.

## INTERVIEW RECRUITING

When I first began attending book clubs in Denver, asking women to take time out of their lives to participate in an interview did not receive a great response. At one very large book club meeting, after the club leader introduced me to the group and people spent some time asking me questions, I passed around a sign-up sheet with my information and a brief statement about the project. Thirty-five

women signed up on the sheet, but only three of those women actually responded to my emails and phone calls to set up an interview. Women in the large book club in Denver, Girls Read, seemed more interested at first, but a higher percentage did not respond to my follow up emails or phone calls. Women in the smaller book club meetings I attended did not express interest in interviews after the first meeting or two, but after I went to a few meetings and demonstrated regular monthly attendance, club members told me they would like to participate in interviews. Once a few women had completed interviews, they were able to tell other club members about the process, and at that point more women seemed comfortable meeting with me. However, what seemed to garner the most interest, even among the local Denver clubs I had already attended on multiple occasions, was the creation of a website.

A few participants did not arrive for scheduled interviews in Denver at the beginning of my research. I began to worry about finding enough participants in the United States, and worried that it would be even more difficult in Ireland as I would be there for a limited time. I created a website, Women's Fiction Study,<sup>10</sup> in an effort to expand my interview recruiting opportunities. The website included information about the project and my connections with the University of Kansas and the Department of Sociology.<sup>11</sup> Publication of the website required additional HRC approval, and once I was granted approval, I shared the website on social media sites including Twitter and Facebook, and these items were then shared by others in my online network. Additionally, I approached book clubs in the Denver and Dublin

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.womensfictionstudy.com>

<sup>11</sup> See Appendix B for additional website information.

areas and provided them the link to the website. The website provided interested participants the opportunity to provide me with their contact information, as well as to express if they would prefer to do an in-person or a Skype interview. A number of local women wanted to do interviews on Skype, and I also garnered interest from all over the United States, as well as a number of women in Ireland who expressed interest in meeting with me when I would be in Dublin for my research. The website seemed to provide credibility for my project and me as a researcher, although it was the same information I had been providing to book clubs and in the informed consent paperwork. Once I made my website available, local bookstores and authors posted my information online, further bolstering my credibility.<sup>12</sup> A website seemed to make participants seem more comfortable providing me with information and schedule times to do interviews, whether in person or via Skype.

## INTERVIEWS

In addition to attending regional book club meetings, I conducted 53 narrative interviews with book club attendees in the United States and Ireland. While four interviews with American women, and one with an Irish woman, were conducted via Skype, the vast majority were conducted in person. Narrative interviews involve asking interviewees to tell me about their life stories, in order to contextualize women's experiences of themselves throughout their lifetimes.

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<sup>12</sup> For examples of additional online recruiting, see Appendix C, which includes a Twitter posting from a well-known Dublin bookstore I visited regularly during my time in Ireland, and a Facebook post telling women about my research.

Describing the importance of narrative interviews in *Telling Stories* (2008), Maynes et al. explain,

Subjectivity and selfhood are the special purview of personal narrative analyses; their exploration brings critical dimensions to the understanding of human agency... Personal narrative analyses have the potential to theorize and investigate and more complex and interesting social actor – constructed through social relations, embodied in an individual with a real history and psychology, and living and changing through time (2008:41).

My research focused on the importance and relevance of reading and book clubs in the deeply personal identities of the women I interviewed in Ireland and in the United States. Therefore, a narrative interview approach allowed me the opportunity to investigate how women utilized reading in constructing their own identities throughout their lifetimes.

In designing my interview questions, I took the advice of Laumann et al. (1994) in understanding that people do not easily discuss sexuality for many reasons. While sex itself is prevalently displayed in many of our cultural mediums, it is often simultaneously considered very personal and private on an individual level. As explained by Mishler (1986), and further discussed by others (Chong 2008, Davidman 2000), interviews are actively co-constructed by the interviewer and the interviewee, as well as contextually by the environment, location, and individual and group histories. A researcher, conducting formal or informal interviews, is never an objective entity in the interview process. Even as a silent presence during an interview, participation implicates the researcher in the construction of the narrative. Researchers and participants interact, create, and learn from one another

through the dynamic interview process. While an interview may be incredibly candid and personal, interviewees choose how and what to answer. It is for this reason that a narrative approach in which my interviewees could tell their stories in ways that were most comfortable to them allowed me to access such personal information. Additionally, by paying close attention to what people told me, how they told their stories, as well as the stories they did not tell, I learned more about the ways gendered and sexual narratives of identity are constructed.

The women I interviewed ranged in age from twenty-four to eighty and were well educated. A vast majority of my interviews, all but one, were with white women. Every one of the women I interviewed self-identified as heterosexual.<sup>13</sup> Certainly, my role as a researcher was important. I, myself, as an educated, heterosexual, white woman, brought a specific identity to my research. As such, it is possible women who believed they were dissimilar to me, upon initial meetings, did not feel comfortable enough to come forward to participate in interviews. Yet, I believe the importance of this distinction goes beyond my own identity as a researcher and lies at the heart of some of the distinctions constructed through participation in “women’s book clubs”. I searched local book club postings in bookstores, local publications and online listings in the Denver and Dublin areas, for “book clubs” and “women’s book clubs” – this is how I met and began working with groups. Without doubt, if I had searched for book clubs specifically for minority women, my research would have looked much different. However, the cultural assumption that book clubs are mostly for white, heterosexual women, unless

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<sup>13</sup> See Appendix D for Interviewee Profiles.



expressly stated so, remained clear throughout the my research. Previous white researchers have found difficulty in studying, for example, black women's reading groups as white researchers and thus outsiders and were more clearly identified as a "researcher" and thus related to differently by book club participants (see, for example, Long's 2003 work in the Houston area). None of the groups I met had specific, exclusionary criteria. When I asked women about other book club members, and gender, racial, or class identity, all of my respondents told me that they would be welcome and open to minority members, lesbians, or people with less education, and in the larger groups many felt certain the lacking diversity was simply coincidental, and not an accurate portrayal of their book clubs on average. Still, I did not observe racial, ethnic, or class diversity within the clubs I studied.

Many women kindly welcomed me into their homes for interviews in both Colorado and in Ireland. This initially surprised me given my anonymity as a researcher who primarily communicated online. My own participation in book clubs, and my ability to talk with my interviewees about reading and literature, played an important role in building trust. Women often wanted to talk to me about my favorite books, or engaged conversations about books we were reading for book club meetings we both attended. However, the actual interview processes proved very different in Ireland than in the United States.

Interviews began as soon as the participant arrived in my interactions in person and via Skype with women in Denver. At nearly every interview, women told me they were in a hurry or explained that they had a specific amount of time to do the interview. Interviews rarely lasted more than ninety minutes, and were more

often closer to one hour long. This approach matched my own initial comfort level with interviews, in that women in the United States, with a few exceptions, did not seem particularly interested in getting to know me or establishing any sort of rapport before jumping right in to the interview itself.

My experience with Irish interviews was drastically different. Women wanted to know about me, to know how I was enjoying Ireland, and to generally engage in small talk before beginning the interview. In fact, one of my first interviews in Ireland asked me if she could give me some advice, which I gladly accepted. She told that I needed to “slow down, stop, and enjoy a pint” before I started the interview, joking that Americans are always in a hurry.

I offered to buy participants a drink or a snack in all of my interviews in Ireland and in the United States, if we met at a place of business. Not one participant in the United States took me up on this offer, but nearly all in Ireland did, after which we chatted about day to day life and got to know one another, albeit superficially, before beginning the interview process in earnest. My interviews in Dublin regularly lasted more than two or three hours, and women often contacted me afterwards to tell me something they had forgotten to talk about during our interview or to expand on questions they wanted to engage further.

In Dublin, I took the bus daily from where I was staying, about two miles outside the city center, into the heart of the city to conduct interviews or to attend book club meetings. Some interviewees offered to meet in the part of town in which I was staying and when I did not have any interviews in the city, I took them up on their offers, conducting a few interviews in small diners, local coffee shops, and even

at a park. Two of the women I interviewed, who reached out to me after hearing about my research through my family in Ireland, picked me up and brought me to their homes. These women introduced me to their families, took great time showing me and talking me through their own personal libraries, and generally brimming with stereotypical Irish hospitality. All of the women I interviewed in Ireland were welcoming and open, and I found the process of scheduling and conducting interviews much less tedious than my experiences in the United States. While I worried that many Irish women would not want to spend their time chatting with an American whom they were not likely to see again, my experience was quite the contrary. The hospitality and willingness to include me in their lives for the purpose of my research was often overwhelming, and I find myself quite indebted to the women who helped make my research in Ireland go much more smoothly than I anticipated.

I conducted a majority of my interviews in the heart of Dublin city in a quaint bar named “The Library.” This felt especially apt, given the topic of our discussion, and in fact, I located the bar early in my time in the city when a book club invited me to join them for their monthly meeting at this location. The Library is located up the rickety stairs of an old boutique hotel. Walking into the bar felt like walking into a library tucked away in an old mansion, as the two rooms that made up the bar were filled with plush red velvety chairs and couches, with small tables placed here and there throughout, oversized chairs hulking over the small tables for patrons’ drinks. Each room had a fireplace around which the best seats were arranged. The walls were lined with bookshelves, filled with tattered copies of various works by Irish

authors: W.B. Yeats, James Joyce, Seamus Heaney, Maeve Binchy, Oscar Wilde, Patrick Kavanagh, and many others. While The Library serves alcohol, it also brews a wonderful espresso, and my interviewees all expressed delight at meeting in such a place. The Library proved a useful place to conduct interviews for various reasons, not the least of which was the appreciation for books expressed by every single one of my interviewees. As I got to know the staff at The Library, I was able to, when needed, ask them to open a third room, set off to the side from the other two main rooms of the establishment. This provided a more private space to conduct interviews for participants who seemed hesitant to answer questions in a bar that, while often empty or sprinkled with a handful of patrons during the early afternoon hours, could draw quite an after work crowd in the early evening. Many of my interviewees enjoyed talking with me when the bar was bustling, and explained that they felt that others were not paying attention to us when the place was busy, allowing them to really open up to me. I became quite comfortable in The Library, as it became a bit like my home away from home during my many interviews in Dublin, and I am thankful that the patient staff allowed me to set up, often for many hours, drinking coffee after coffee, often graciously returning my tips to me when I attempted to tip for their service. Finding a place that was so welcoming and comfortable played an important role in my own research process, as my own comfort in asking women to share intimate details about their lives certainly played a role in the comfort of interviewees.

During interviews, I took detailed notes in addition to recording our conversations. This proved particularly helpful in identifying common themes and

sections of my interview checklist that people found more difficult to answer, or that needed clarification. Although my checklist did not change throughout the interview process, my ability to ask questions in a way that elicited detailed answers from participants grew, and I learned to formulate different wordings, and clarify or change my approach when needed.<sup>14</sup> In particular, I detected difficulties Irish women had addressing questions about “identity.” I initially took it for granted that Irish women, like American women, would have some clearly defined answers about their own gendered and sexual identity, but often it was assumed I was asking about sexual orientation. As such, I had to learn to ask these particular questions and to discuss my questions more clearly throughout my research.

The combination of narrative interviews with group-based research in book club meetings provided unique insight into the ways people talk about their sexual identity. This approach was particularly useful because it afforded an opportunity to observe discussions of and about the construction of sexuality in a relational sense. I expected people to behave and respond differently in one-on-one interview settings than they behaved in a group setting, and this added insight enriched my interview data. As explained by Courtney Bender,

The measure of a narrative’s force cannot be found through interviews alone but must be coupled with observations of the various contexts where we might understand how such self-descriptions shape individuals’ activities, approaches, and values (2003:70).

Thus, through the use of in-depth narrative interviews and lengthy observations of book club meetings, alongside consistent analysis throughout the project, this

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<sup>14</sup> See Appendix E for Interview Guide

international comparison of American and Irish women's book clubs examines the ways differences in cultural conventions about sexuality and desire translate into different narratives and understandings of gender and sexual identity.

## ANALYSIS

I completed my interviews and ethnographic fieldwork in the summer of 2014. Throughout my research, I transcribed, coded, and analyzed my data. I coded each interview transcript using the qualitative analysis software, Atlas.ti. I was influenced by the grounded theory approach, which allows the interview data to generate important themes from the narratives of interviewees (Glazer and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1990). Thus, in coding my transcripts, I allowed themes to emerge from interview data. At the same time, because I set about my research with specific questions about sexuality, I utilized both inductive and deductive approaches to examining interview and book club data. My coding progressed through multiple stages of analysis, starting with broad, exploratory and explanatory codes, from which I eventually sorted into smaller groups. First, I created open codes, such as "sexuality" and "romance." Based on several overarching themes that emerged as I worked through my transcriptions and analysis, I developed and coded subthemes (Lofland and Lofland 1995). I went deeper into the subthemes to develop axial codes that interconnected the larger categories, and helped me identify relationships within the larger open codes, such as "childhood learning about sexuality" or "status attainment" (Creswell 1998). The coding process allowed me to put together the overall story of the experiences of the

women I interviewed. This extensive process of analysis allowed me to identify the primary thematic elements of my research.

Many of my interviewees were interested in my work and volunteered to answer any additional questions I might have, providing me the opportunity to clarify or seek additional information throughout the writing process. In addition to working with interview transcripts, I drew heavily on field notes I took during and after book club meetings, as well as book club meeting recordings when audible. The consistent back and forth between individual interviews and group meetings was useful in my identification of important themes, especially when I was able to conduct interviews shortly after a book club meeting. Often, women were interested in talking to me about topics that had been superficially discussed in a club meeting, and this allowed me to maintain a consistent understanding of what was important to the book club members, as well as to learn more about topics they may have been uncomfortable discussing in a group environment. This combination of research methods, including ethnographic fieldwork at book club meetings and in-depth, narrative interviews, provided great insight throughout the research process.

### **CHAPTER 3**

#### **READING IDENTITY: DEVELOPMENT OF KNOWLEDGE AND SOCIAL CAPITAL**

It was a blustery, snowy evening in Denver when I walked along a quiet, nearly deserted sidewalk until I came upon a forest-themed bar, the sign hidden by the snow. I stepped into the bar and saw a few women seated on barstools that resembled tree stumps along a long, narrow bar made of beetle-kill pine. The women were seated in groups of two or three, with ample space between them, and I noticed a book on the bar in the middle of one of the small groups. I asked the women if they were there for book club and they invited me to sit with them. Within half an hour, the entire bar, as well as the booths along the wall, was full with women arriving for book club. Eventually the group spilled into a second back room of the bar. Some women arrived with friends, and greeted other club members with hugs and caught up on life. Other women, like me, were there for the first time, and watched the bustling commotion without joining in on the conversation. Once everyone ordered food and drinks, Jennifer called the meeting to order. She asked a few women to volunteer to be “in charge” of ten to fifteen women, and passed around a few pieces of paper with printed questions about the book we read that month. Each group of women addressed the questions themselves, and occasionally, Jennifer asked a question of the entire group. The club became so popular that within two months a new venue was located so that smaller groups of ten women could sit at a table and talk to one another, with each group participating in a larger discussion at the end. At the end of each two-hour club meeting, the group discussed the book to read for the next month, and Jennifer often drew random names to give



away two or three copies of the next month's book. Afterwards, women did not seem to linger, but gathered their belongings and headed off for the evening. This group continues to remain active and popular, with over 1500 women on the club website, and more than forty women in regular attendance at monthly club meetings.

Months later, on a rainy Dublin evening, I walked along a cobbled side street and ducked into the entrance of a bustling restaurant where I had been invited to meet a book club. I had only met one of the women in the small club, made up of friends and coworkers, so I waited until Lisa arrived to walk in with her. She arrived and we walked to a large table where four women already sat. Each woman jumped up and said hello, hugging and kissing Lisa, and warmly welcoming me to their meeting. They joked they were just there for dinner and drinks, and the books made a good excuse to go out on a weeknight. The table ordered a few bottles of wine and several items to share, and while we waited for the food to arrive, everyone caught up with one another about work, life, boyfriends, pets, families, and roommates. Within an hour, all 7 members arrived, straight from work. Amidst the busy, loud, restaurant, the women talked and talked about the books they'd read in the six weeks since their last book club meeting. Conversations flowed and several hours passed before everyone felt they were ready to leave for the evening. Each member mentioned a book or two that they thought would be an interesting read for the next month's group, and after much discussion, two texts were chosen by general agreement. At the end of the evening, we all split the bill; everyone hugged one another and made arrangements to walk one another to their cars. Two of the

women in attendance offered to walk me to my bus stop, and waited there with me until the bus arrived.

These two book club meetings demonstrate the variety in the book club meetings I attended. Most club meetings were not as large as the biggest club in Denver, and most were not quite as intimate as the small group of friends in Dublin. Some of the smaller clubs used printed reading and book club guides; others allowed conversation to flow more freely. Others, still, asked a few women each month to prepare a summary of the book the group read, and to compose questions for the groups to discuss. While the clubs themselves were quite varied, they all had an important commonality. Namely, the women always seemed happy to be attending book club. Even if they had not had time to read the entire book or had missed a few meetings, women expressed joy in attending the club meetings. The importance of this social interaction remained clear in every book club I attended in the United States and in Ireland.

The ways in which women developed relationships with books and reading are central to an analysis of the women and book clubs I studied. First, in order to contextualize contemporary women's experiences, it is necessary to examine the history of women's book clubs and reading groups. I will discuss the history of women's reading groups and examine current studies of present-day women's book clubs. Second, I will discuss how the women I interviewed cultivated reading habits and identified reading as important to their personal sense of identity. Interviewees developed reading habits early in life, primarily through reading modeled by parents, and continued their reading habits throughout adolescence and adulthood

as reading had become ingrained in their way of life as a central element of their habitus. Women began to understand themselves through reading and further developed this understanding and sense of identity through participation in book club. Finally, I will examine the ways reading groups played an integral role not only in identity formation and the construction of knowledge, but in developing important relationships and social connections for women readers. Social capital is essential to human health and happiness, and for women in Ireland and the United States, book clubs helped fulfill the need for strong social networks and connections.

## WOMEN'S READING GROUPS

A contemporary, comparative study of women's book clubs must be contextualized within the larger framework of a longstanding history of reading groups in the United States and Europe. During the medieval period, families and neighbors gathered and listened while people read aloud, forming early sorts of reading communities (Howe 1993). Twelfth century "textual communities" in European centers, wherein readers associated with one another to learn, generated and sustained collective knowledge (Stock 1983). In fifteenth century France, women who gathered to spin wool took turns reading to one another and discussing texts (Hartley 2002). The advent of the printing press in the mid-fifteenth century meant that more people – albeit wealthy, educated, literate, and primarily male – were able to access printed literature and on a wider scale. This too, increased communities such as publishing houses, literary debating societies, and reading groups, constructed around reading (Johns 1998).

White women in the United States began creating book clubs throughout the country after the Civil War. Reading groups, for wealthy antebellum women, were not only gatherings to talk about reading, but served in many ways as social movements, often challenging norms of femininity. Women's reading groups were known as literary clubs, and adhered to strict regulations regarding topics, readings, and structure of meetings. During the Civil War, as during subsequent large-scale wars, women organized and developed strong ties for self-reliance and organization to support the war effort (Long 2003). When the Civil War ended, this self-reliance did not altogether disappear, and women were able to maintain a modicum of independence they had developed while fathers, husbands, and brothers were at war, but in an apolitical way now that war was over. Women were able to participate in social groups without challenging political and legal boundaries for women (Seaholm 1988).

After the Civil War, the role of middle and upper-middle class women changed: wealthy women simultaneously had more leisure time while the sphere of feminine domesticity narrowed; additionally, the gap between men and women, and between the public world of men and the private, feminine world of the home, particularly as women moved into more domestic roles and out of employment, increased (Cowan 1983). During this time period, education as a central institution became more important to the American middle class, but this education was only available to boys. Some girls in wealthy families were able to obtain education, but not to the same degree as their brothers. Even as higher education became be accessible to some women in the late 1800s, women in higher education were not

the norm (Martin 1987). Women were not often able or expected to attend college, but could participate in learning throughout their lifetime via literary clubs. Women were not admitted to formal education in the United States until 1786, and for subsequent decades women's education was available to only wealthy white women (Hellinger and Judd 1991). Mass public education for whites became standard across the United States by 1850, and black children began attending school after the Civil War. During this time, the literacy rates of white women increased dramatically to match that of white men (Schwager 1987). In Ireland, education was not widespread until much later than in the United States. Free secondary education became a right of citizenship in 1967 and became compulsory countrywide in 1972 (Hutton and Walsh 2011). While women's access to education varied in Ireland and the United States, particularly with regard to the timeline, reading groups played an important role in both countries (Hartley 2002). American women's reading groups began formally meeting in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and by the 18<sup>th</sup> century were starting in countries worldwide, "partly in response to the widespread dicta that education was essential to democracy" (Davisdon 1986:65). Women's reading groups provided important social capital, as well as important cultural capital, like the kind developed through networks and knowledge that higher education conferred for men. In both countries, these particular forms of capital were under available and under accessible to women, and reading groups served to mitigate that unavailability, particularly for middle and upper class women.

The late nineteenth century signaled a time when European and American urban upper class began to focus on the importance of culture, particularly as it

related to dominant ideas about art, music, theater, and literature. Social ideology about high culture and the preservation and perpetuation of high culture became widespread. Theaters, concert halls, and museums were built throughout metropolitan areas and high cultural knowledge was legitimated and linked to cultural and financial exclusivity (DiMaggio 1982). Wealthy white women were encouraged to adhere to high cultural standards as an inherent part of femininity and women were thus linked to the aesthetic realm (Long 2003). Women who were able to appropriate high culture could, at the same time, use this appropriation to legitimate their own cultural authority through literacy groups.

Women's quest for knowledge, education, and self-improvement was a challenge to previously altruistic, service-based women's groups of the earlier nineteenth century. Historical researchers have examined this push for women's education, explaining, "the cry of women emerging from a darkened past was "light, more light" and light was breaking. Gradually came the demand and the opportunity for education; for intellectual freedom; for cultivation of gifts and faculties" (Martin 1987:39). With these cries for more knowledge came a threat to traditional male authority, and many men discouraged such activities. Seaholm's (1988) study of the white women's progressive movement tells of women rushing home from literary clubs to arrive and prepare dinner before their husbands reached home, and of women dropping out of literary clubs due to their husband's distaste for the clubs, in order to maintain peace in their household. One way groups countered these arguments against women's reading groups was through a strict adherence to organization and parliamentary procedure (Long 2003). In this way, groups

signaled that they, too, were “serious” consumers of literature and high culture – making literary groups different from other, less formal women’s organizations. As reading, discussion, analysis, and continued study within the context of high culture was given more gravity, women’s reading groups were thus legitimated (Blair 1980). While these literary groups were decidedly apolitical, the opportunity for engagement with literature and education was empowering to group members, and challenged the status quo.

A major element of early women’s reading groups is the huge influence these groups had on the creation of public libraries in the United States. In the 1800s, books were not readily available in all regions, and the book trade was not a thriving or widespread industry. Women in literary groups primarily relied on the private libraries of people they knew, or on small collections in towns and cities where members could borrow books for a relatively hefty monthly fee. At this time, book clubs circulated books among members (this is a characteristic that remains among contemporary lower-income book clubs, see for example, Gere 1997). Having only a small sample of writing on which to rely, early literary groups reinforced the canon of “good” literature as consisting of literary classics, as long defined from an Anglocentric perspective. While women’s reading groups reinforced the notion that women were consumers, rather than creators, of culture, they also served to increase the knowledge, education, and exposure for American women. As these groups began to look at the social world around them, as well as to increase their own literary abilities, reading groups also began to embark on activist endeavors. While many women in Victorian-era book groups may have been interested in

suffrage, literary groups remained staunchly outside of the realm of political activism and instead focused on Progressive Era reform – namely education and culture (Long 2003). Women’s literary groups started kindergartens, created college scholarships, dormitories for women, campaigned for compulsory education (albeit still racially exclusive), and established a vast majority of public libraries in the United States (Seaholm 1988). Women in late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> century reading groups thus increased their own education and challenged social norms, but did so within the larger constraints of a patriarchal culture where rights to vote, attend school, or own property had not yet been attained. Reading groups, while in many ways perpetuating the status quo, were simultaneously subverting norms of femininity, the cultural production of knowledge, and education.

Modern reading groups experienced a surge in the mid 1990s in both the United States and in the United Kingdom. A majority (two-thirds) of contemporary book clubs in the US and in the UK are women-only groups. The oldest, most formal groups in both countries are all male groups, but these groups comprise only about 6% of contemporary groups (Hartley 2002). Oprah’s Book Club, established in 1996, made reading seem more accessible to consumers, and the concept of a book club, particularly for women, became drastically more popular. Books selected to be on Oprah’s list sold hundreds of thousands of copies, and people began talking about reading in a more public way – book clubs became a contemporary, normal part of life for many women (Konchar Farr 2004). In the UK, popular radio host James Naughtie started the Radio 4 Bookclub in 1998. While Oprah’s Book Club ended in 2002, Naughtie’s radio-based book club continues to this day (Hartley 2002). *The*



*Irish Times* newspaper established a book club in 2014. In this club, members meet to talk about the books and also get together to meet and discuss the texts with the authors themselves. Readers in this club also engage in online discussions with other readers around the country.<sup>15</sup> Large-scale contemporary book clubs are popular across the globe, and have proven very influential in the creation of smaller, more intimate book clubs like many of the ones I studied.

Contemporary women's reading groups have certainly been influenced by a longstanding history of women-only literary groups, but contemporary reading groups are markedly different from their predecessors. Namely, because higher education for women is far more common, contemporary reading groups tend to be comprised of well-educated members. A majority of women's book club members have college degrees, and advanced degrees are not uncommon in women's reading groups. Second, although women still navigate the public/private dichotomy, more women work outside the home, and changes in the structure, concepts, and expectations of femininity have allowed women more freedom in intellectual pursuits. As such, contemporary reading groups serve to continue some of the positives of a modern college experience, allowing a more leisurely engagement with literature, as opposed to earlier groups in which literary clubs served as a primary source of education. Additionally, contemporary women's groups do not seem to have to "prove" their literary and cultural competence. Due to the high likelihood of college education among club members, women are more comfortable analyzing literature and contemporary groups model this comfort through informal,

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<sup>15</sup> <http://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/the-book-club>

less structured, discussions (Long 2003). Of course, not all women who participate in book clubs are highly educated. Hartley's (2002) study examined a reading group in a rural community in England that was comprised of women who had attended high school but not any college. For these women, starting or joining a book club and working through difficult classic literature provided an opportunity to learn in the absence of access to formal higher education. This is not to say that women do not still face a double-bind, that of pursuing education and a career while simultaneously managing and caring for a majority of households and families and maintaining ideals of femininity. However, contemporary women's book clubs do not serve primarily to work for social change or create educational institutions, but instead now serve social and cultural purposes.

Yet, at the very heart of women's book clubs, we can see a common thread from the early Victorian era through today:

Reading groups are centrally focused on books and ideas. They may engage issues of identity and provide validation for many different inflections of womanhood, but their primary mission, today as in the early years of the nineteenth-century literary club movement, centers of reading, the pleasures of the text, and normative conversations that consider both books and life experience. Reading groups still serve middle-class women as time spent for self-improvement, for personal fulfillment, and for exploration of personal identity, but most particularly as time for the development of a self that is engaged with the literary imagination and dedicated to the discussion of ideas, meaning, and values in the company of equally dedicated companions. (Long 2003:73).

Women's reading groups continue to allow women an important opportunity to examine and work through the many contradictions of day-to-day life, to reflect on

literature and engage with high culture, and to learn, both through literature and through group interactions, about the social and cultural world.

Overall, the longstanding history of women's reading groups is important in the development of contemporary reading groups. Early women's reading groups played valuable roles in the pursuit of education for women, and contemporary reading groups have benefited from the changes in educational opportunities for contemporary women readers. The surge in popularity of book clubs in the mid-1990s, influenced strongly by "Oprah's Book Club" remains strong, with thousands of women's book clubs meeting worldwide. Women's book clubs, on average, are comprised of well-educated, privileged women, but even for privileged women, book clubs continue to meet important educational and social needs for members.

## BECOMING READERS

The experiences of reading, and the importance of reading in women's sense of self and identity, were themes prevalent throughout my interviews. In fact, the women I interviewed expressed that reading was central to their identity. While many women explained that it was not necessarily important in the way they were understood or perceived by other people, when it came to developing a strong sense of self and constructing an identity, reading was essential for my interviewees. Alice, a single 31-year-old ESL teacher in Denver, grew up what she called a "typical American family," although she began questioning that when her parents divorced in 2011. Alice told me that she relied on books to help her "find my way" during her childhood and again as an adult. She explained, "it has always helped me figure out

who I am, who I wanted to be.” Reading played a role in identity formation through the process of developing lifelong reading habits, during which women began to construct a sense of self in relation to the stories and characters with which they interacted throughout their lifetimes.

### *Development of Reading Habits*

The women I interviewed, in the United States and in Ireland, told me of the memories they had regarding reading as children. All of the women I interviewed spoke with me about one or both of their parents reading. Even women whose parents did not read voraciously told me about the importance their parents placed on their development as readers. Beth, a 40-year-old married librarian from Colorado, knew she wanted to be a librarian for as long as she could remember. Beth attributed that to her mother’s excitement and the joy she took in going to the library with her mother as a young child. Beth explained, “a lot of it was being read to and having books around all the time. Reading was something I wanted to do, something I wanted to learn.” Women told me about the vacations they took during childhood, and how much they looked forward to the opportunity to spend time reading, not worrying about schoolwork or playing with friends. Niamh, an office manager in Dublin, aged 26, grew up in south Dublin. She spent a great deal of time at her grandfather’s farm, as her grandfather had been a horse jockey before he retired on his farm. She told me she loved going to visit her mother’s childhood home, and when she wasn’t spending time with the horses, she was reading. Niamh reminisced,

I remember going down to the country to Tipperary to my mam's grandmother's place. There was no TV or anything. There wasn't even a shower. It was one of those really old country homes. We'd have the open fire and I'd sit on a little stool by the fire and just read for the whole weekend. I wouldn't take my head out of the book until we were leaving again.

For these women, reading strongly marked their development – both on an intellectual and personal level. Many told me about their mothers or fathers expressing regret about not developing reading habits as children, and so even for children who did not grow up with parents who read a great deal, books and reading consistently played an important role in childhood.

One of the primary ways reading habits were developed was through the modeling of early reading by parents or other important adults. One interviewee, Rachel, a 34 year-old married office manager in Dublin who founded a book club for her female friends and coworkers, told me how central reading was during her childhood. Rachel grew up in a household that transitioned from the working-class to the middle class when her parents' company became successful. She explained that education was highly valued in her household, and the children were encouraged to seek out educational and career pathways that interested them. Every week, Rachel's father would stop by the bookstore and pick up a specific book or comic for Rachel and each of her siblings, a ritual she recalled fondly:

Rachel: I used to read a lot. My Dad used to get us a comic or a book every Friday. That got us all into reading.

Christy: How early did he do that?

- Rachel: Oh God, as long as I remember. When we were really young, we used to get *Twinkle*, which is a comic for really young kids. Then we progressed on to books. Even when we were 15 and 16, we still got them because we were just obsessed with them. My mam would read them and everything. The boys got *Dandy and Beano* [sic]. Then we'd all just swap.
- Christy: You each got your own?
- Rachel: Yeah, we all got one each on a Friday as a treat and a bar of chocolate.
- Christy: How did your Dad pick them?
- Rachel: Big discussion on Thursday night about what book and bar we were going to get! I think he would have picked them originally because I think they're what my parents would have read. They would have been mad into, especially *Beano and Dandy*, because my mam was a bit of a tomboy. My mam wouldn't have read much but she would encourage us to read.

Many interviewees expressed similar fond memories. Kelly, a married woman in her early thirties who worked in the publishing industry in Denver, explained,

It's always been important. I've done it for as long as I could remember. I do remember my parents being very supportive of reading when I was growing up. Before I went to bed every night, my mom would read to me. I remember sitting with my parents and them reading books to me. Like, me pretending to read, where you turn the pages, but they let me say my own words.

This memory sparked an emotional moment for Kelly, and her eyes filled with tears as she reminisced about the close relationship she had with her family. She felt the closeness was fostered through early years spent reading with her parents. These

kinds of important formative moments cemented, for a majority of the women I interviewed, the value of reading and an excitement about reading material.

Another key theme for the women I interviewed revolved around memories of checking out books at the library. One element I found particularly interesting was that only one interviewee, Rachel, spoke of her father's deep involvement in childhood reading. For the rest of the women I interviewed, mothers provided the impetus to go to the library and to check out books and read regularly. Interviewees explained that a majority of the influence they had regarding reading came from their mothers, and it was mostly mothers who took children to the library. In this sense, while early reading was modeled to male and female children, the women I interviewed seemed to feel that reading was particularly important because they were girls. Women's role as nurturers and mothers has long been linked to educating their children, as discussed previously, women's reading groups worked to establish nearly seventy-five percent of public libraries in the United States (Long 2003). Thus, it does not come as a surprise that middle-class mothers, in both the US and Ireland, provided a great deal of encouragement for their children to read both in and out of school.

Women spoke fondly of their memories of going to the library. Shirley, a retired CFO of a construction company in Colorado, was a self-described "military brat" and moved around the United States often as her father's post changed regularly. She did not enjoy constantly trying to make new friends, and often felt shy and uninterested at school. She tried different sports teams and joined clubs, but

nothing quite affected her in the way reading did. Shirley explained,

I can remember one of my most impressive memories is when I visited a library for the first time. I'm not sure how old I was but I was like "Wow! You can take these home?" That was so cool!

Shirley took comfort in knowing that she could find a library anywhere her family lived. Nearly every interview included a story about the first time visiting a library, and the freedom to explore shelves and shelves of books. Maeve, 34 and unmarried, a book buyer for a major Irish publisher, told me about the countless hours she spent reading books during her childhood, a habit that she continued into adulthood. During her childhood, the children in her family often gathered in the living room after dinner and settled into a routine of reading books, her father often reading the newspaper. After routine evening housework, her mother joined them, reading or asking them about the books they were reading. Maeve recollected,

I suppose when I was quite young, my parents bought me books. Then we did start to go to the library. Our whole family would go to the library on Saturday morning, every week like that. Everyone would get in the car and we'd all go spend an hour or two in the library. I'd pick out what books I wanted. My mam never really dictated what I was allowed to take home or not. I'd take out three books and have them finished in two days. If I wanted to take out ten books, fine. If I wanted to take out the same books, no matter, as long as I was reading.

In this sense, we can see the importance of reading, particularly as modeled by parents during early childhood, in the development of reading as central to the identity of women who join book clubs as adults.



### *Continuing Reading Habits*

Reading remained central to the sense of self and identity throughout the lifetimes of the women in this study. Women spoke eloquently of the days and hours they spent reading. Many women talked at length about the deep love of reading they had developed from early childhood and carried throughout their lifetimes. This was not unlike research others have done regarding women's reading habits. Researchers have spoken of the intense displays of deep love and affection readers have for books (Burke 1999; Kooy 2003; Schwartz 1996). Kooy, in her study of teachers creating reading groups in their schools, explained, "their love for reading is so profoundly woven into their identities that the resulting knowledge reaches into all the corners of these teachers' lived experiences" (2003:140). This was true for most of the women I interviewed in both the United States and Ireland. The importance of reading in the lives of the women I interviewed cannot be overstated.

Reading was clearly important in the development of identity and knowledge for the women I interviewed in Ireland and the United States. Women had fond memories of going to the library or reading books on vacation, but these memories speak to more than just something women did in their spare time. Interviewees began to develop a sense of self through their interactions with books from an early age. As this sense of self developed and became clearer throughout their lifetime, reading itself became an important element of women's habitus. Reading, then, through early experiences that set the stage for a lifetime of literature consumption, became ingrained in the day-to-day experiences and sense of self for interviewees.

## JOINING THE CLUB

Contemporary work in cultural sociology focuses on the social nature of reading. Although many envision reading as a solitary event, the role of gatekeepers and public dialogue about reading is integral in how people engage with literature.<sup>16</sup> Reading groups have long existed, but a boom in popularity began in the 1980s, and took off again in the mid 1990s, fueled by major celebrity endorsements of book clubs reminding readers how valued reading is in contemporary society (Griswold et al. 2005). The overall message and public assumption is that reading and talking about reading are good for society and its members.

### *Knowledge and Identity Formation*

Gender is certainly relevant in examining the social nature of reading. Elizabeth Long's (2003) study of Houston women's book clubs found that group members sought the social element of book clubs to fulfill their interests, expressed by many as a "need," in "intelligent" conversation with like-minded, generally well-educated women. Adult women are highly represented as readers, although underrepresented among authors (Rogers 1991). Studies of high school adolescents point to the importance of book clubs in identity development and exploring one's social world. As discussed previously, reading provides an important building block for girls and adolescent women to develop their sense of identity and sense of self. Polleck, in her 2010 study of female adolescent readers explained,

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<sup>16</sup> For example, two popular sources consumers seek for reading guidance include *The New York Times Book Review* and Oprah's Book Club.

In terms of identity, the book clubs served as a place for the girls to talk about what it means to be adolescent, female, and in an environment that sometimes undermines their hopes for the future. The girls used the books and characters as blueprints and guides, as examples and non-examples in understanding themselves and their world. In constructing their identities, the girls tackled topics such as self-esteem and sense of agency (2010:59).

Thus, while women were developing a sense of identity through their engagement with literature, book clubs and reading groups provided a unique way to navigate identity and work through a sense of self in the context of societal expectations and experiences.

Knowledge development was especially important for Irish interviewees. In particular, women in Ireland explained that they utilized book club meetings to ensure they truly understood the texts they read, and to make sure they had a fully developed sense of what was important to the other women at book club meetings. Lana, an elementary school teacher in Dublin, was born to an Irish father and a Polish mother. She was a toddler in Poland when her family relocated to Ireland. Her parents were quite wealthy, and she attended private boarding school in Dublin during childhood and adolescence. Lana projected a confidence about her own aptitude at reading, and over the course of our four-hour interview, spoke at length about the books she loved and why she loved them. Still, she felt that book club meetings allowed her the opportunity to be comfortable admitting when she felt unsure, an experience she had not had in her family or in school. Lana explained how she was able to better engage the literature through this process,

I'm more likely to ask, "I didn't understand why this was necessary," or "What was the point of such and such?"

Sometimes one of the girls will have a reason for it and I understand the book better. I like that, that you appreciate more what you've read. Sometimes they say, "I didn't get it either" or "I don't think it was necessary," or "there's no point to it."

In this way, Lana felt more comfortable engaging texts in a casual, low-stress way, and examining her own understandings through the supportive environment of the book club. Natasha, an engaged bank teller, echoed this sentiment when she joked, "I also like that reassurance that I'm not missing something huge, that I wasn't just a bit stupid when I was reading it!" Self-deprecating humor aside, a majority of the women I interviewed in Ireland talked to me about the ways book club helped them develop a deeper understanding of the literature they read, as well as their feelings about it. Evelyn, a 52-year-old social worker in Dublin, grew up in what she called a "rotten" family. Evelyn and her mother and sister experienced physical abuse at the hands of her father. She always loved reading, and spent a great deal of her childhood escaping into books. Evelyn became a social worker so that she could help provide children in harmful situations some opportunities for safety. As she advocated for families in Dublin, she found she became more outgoing in her personal life as well, and eventually joined a book club. Evelyn explained,

I think one of the reasons why I wanted to join the book club and that I set it up was that I wanted to hear, I wanted to get a deeper understanding and actually look deeper at books, and the stories behind them and see, "have I got the real thing?" Because I hadn't the confidence to believe that I was getting all I should from what I read. It's not about getting the book, it's more than that, I get every book, but I get it in my way. I wanted to see what other people got from it and was I getting all I should from it.

This interest in situating one's own understanding, and confirming the

interpretation of a particular book was unique to Irish interviewees. American women did not openly discuss questions of their own understanding about the texts they read for book club.

The opportunities within book clubs for women to navigate identity and society were countless. Reading common texts and participating in a book club allowed members to “create opportunities to interpret personal and collective experience” (Sumara 2002:19). This could be important on a strictly educational level, but the power of reading and discussing texts in a group went beyond simply education. The feedback from club members allowed women to place themselves in the social world. Mary, aged 52, a married English teacher in Denver, said that she spent a great deal of her life being the person other people wanted her to be. She felt pressure from her parents to attain high standards for success in school as a child, and told me she “hid” behind her academic pursuits, and then spent a great deal of her adult life focusing on her children. Mary participated in consciousness raising groups during college and identified as a feminist, she felt her ties to the feminist community decrease as she had children and focused more on her family life. In her early forties, a friend recommended she join her book club, and she felt this experience helped her get more in touch with her “real” self. Mary explained,

It's kind of like you feel, you can just sound out things.  
You can say it out loud and see what happens to it.  
Things you have only said to yourself, only thought to  
yourself. Now you can kind of say it out loud and get  
feedback on it.

This feedback was then internalized and became a part of how club members understood the world and identified their own place in it. Some women spoke of

developing a stronger sense of self in direct contradiction to feedback they have received at book club, particularly as they became more confident about their own ideas in the face of argument. Most women, though, spoke of testing out ideas and theories about the world, as well as determining appropriate boundaries for ideas, behaviors and identities.

### *Developing Confidence*

Women built confidence as they participated in book clubs through the production of knowledge within book clubs and interactions reinforcing literary competence. Early women's book clubs allowed women to begin developing literary competence and a cultural voice; book clubs continue to function in this way. The closeness developed through reading and discussing shared texts with other women provided important pieces of identity development for the women involved. Long's (2003) research showed that women involved in book clubs develop greater confidence in themselves than before they were in book club, make new friends, and also demonstrate more self-reflection in their own lives and tolerance of the opinions and experiences of others. Polleck's (2010) study echoed this finding, as she explained participants expressing how transformative the experience of engaging with other readers in book club could be, an environment in which club members "worked to broaden their understandings of the texts, themselves, and the world" (64).

Women in this study relied on books as central to identity formation in various ways, but overall confidence and a strong sense of self remained key themes

throughout my interviews. For many women, reading itself worked to build confidence – either as children, or young women, and continued to build confidence for adults. Victoria, a 65 year-old widowed attorney outside of Dublin, recalled being incredibly shy as a child, often freezing, paralyzed with fear, when she had to speak in front of others. Victoria told me about spending days at school with her head on her desk to hide her crying, because she felt so shy and nervous around her classmates. She explained,

That's one area I don't feel as self-conscious anymore. I wouldn't have been able to speak.... I suppose it gives me a confidence, in company, to talk in a way I would not have otherwise had the courage to do, or the ability.

Spending time with books and feeling more confident about her capabilities as a reader allowed Victoria to begin feeling confident enough to attend a small book club. Victoria explained that at first she read the books but felt too shy to speak up during book club meetings. Over time she began to feel more confident in her interactions with other club members, and started finding her voice in group conversations. Overcoming these issues with shyness eventually inspired Victoria to attend college and become an attorney. While Victoria's story is especially unique, many women attributed gains in self-confidence to their book club participation.

Lisa, a 33 year-old married software engineer in Dublin, moved to Dublin from Limerick shortly before she and her husband married. The move meant a new job and fewer social connections, which were difficult for Lisa changes due to her introverted nature. Joining a book club helped her become comfortable and expanded her social circle. She explained, "I used it as a means to actually talk to people in a way, to inform myself. It did give me more confidence to talk about

things, from what I've read in books and that kind of thing." It was not only Irish women expressing the confidence building aspects of reading, as many women in Denver described similar experiences to me. Heather, a 65 year old, twice divorced retired school teacher told me much of her life had been nomadic. Her father was in the Navy, and her mother a homemaker; she recalled moving regularly as a child, and often began attending a new school during the middle of the school year. Her older brother was often bullied, so she did what she could to avoid standing out. She explained,

I used to be so shy; I used to find it difficult to actually know what to talk to people about. I was always afraid I'd say the wrong thing or embarrass myself, or what I'd say would be wrong.

Participation in book club helped Heather to develop confidence in her own opinions, to which she partly attributed her ability to find the strength to not only leave a harmful marriage, but to be comfortable as a single, retired woman. The morning of our interview, Heather had just closed on a home – the first home she owned by herself, and she excitedly regaled me with stories about finally having the confidence to choose exactly what she wanted, for the first time in her life.

Many of the women I interviewed said they felt shy or lacked self-confidence at some point in their lives. This is most certainly a gendered phenomenon. Women learn from a very early age that dependence on others, particularly men, for financial, emotional, and sexual support is expected as part of femininity. These constructs of women as dependent are portrayed in everything from Disney films to pre-teen magazines to popular prime-time television shows and news reporting (Brooks and Herbert 2006; Consalvo 2006; Sloop 2006). Combined, these cultural



messages of submissive femininity reinforce patriarchal and sexist ideals while normalizing traditional gender roles that encourage women to be timid, meek, and dependent. However, women are not simply passive bodies on which gender is constructed and enacted (Bryant and Schofield 2007). While some women find ways to destabilize gendered boundaries by openly behaving in ways that challenge some sexual norms, these changes often take place within the strict structures of heteronormativity. Women thus attempt to create new gendered rules while working within patriarchal norms of femininity (Beres and Farvid 2010; Bettie 2003; Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Ronen 2010; Wilkins 2004). In this sense, as women developed confidence through reading and participation in book clubs, they simultaneously challenged social norms and gendered expectations. At the same time, because reading is linked to femininity, while women were able to develop confidence, they concurrently reinforce their gendered identity.

## SOCIAL CAPITAL AND BOOK CLUB PARTICIPATION

The importance of connections with other people, close personal relationships and networks, are taken for granted within sociology, since Durkheim's (1897) groundbreaking study on suicide and social cohesion. Since the work of early sociologists, social scientists developed the concept of social capital. Social capital, often conceptualized as social networks, or whom you know, is defined as "features of social organization such as networks, norms and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (Putnam 2000:5). Social integration, or how much people in a given society rely on one another, is

inherently linked to social capital (Erickson 1996; Lin and Ao 2008; Song and Lin 2008, 2009). High levels of social integration allow people to increase their social networks and connections, thus increasing their ability to rely on others, which in turn increases social capital (Song 2010). Social capital is important across all cultures, and remains relevant over time, even as societies change dramatically (Marsden and Gorman 2001; Lin 1999; Portes 1998).

Recent research demonstrates that high levels of social capital are linked to multiple health outcomes, and particularly overall physical health (House et al. 1988; Lin and Peek 1999; Pescosolido and Levy 2002; Smith and Christakis 2008). Individuals with low social capital over a lifetime experience difficulty sleeping and high blood pressure (Jonsson et al. 2014). Additionally, people with low social capital have lower educational outcomes (Putnam 2000), experience higher levels of psychological distress (Song and Chang 2012), difficulty moderating psychological distress and behaviors in appropriate ways (Pulkkinen et al. 2011) and lower levels of social functioning (Baheiraei et al. 2015). While men benefit from many longstanding social networks, receiving social, cultural, and economic benefits through various work related “boys clubs,” women have not historically experienced these benefits through employment (Lutter 2015). Thus, women’s social networks appear to be particularly important in the development of social capital and the benefits of high levels of social capital (Baheiraei et al. 2015). Social capital, like other forms of capital examined in this dissertation, can be interconvertible with other forms of capital. Research demonstrates that people with high social status are considered more valuable, and more sought after in social interactions

(Laumann and Senter 1976; Thye 2000). As with cultural and erotic capital, high social capital is linked to popularity, and those with high status confer this status through their interactions and networks. Social capital is integral to social well-being, as social networks are valuable throughout the life course.

The importance of social networks and ensuing social capital cannot be overstated. However, as we age, particularly as we move past adolescence and early adulthood and leave college, our ready-made, built in social networks become more minimal (Christakis and Fowler 2011). Because of this, in order to maintain networks and continue building social capital, adults must actively seek out groups in which to develop these important connections. Anne, a graduate student in Dublin, aged twenty-four, explained that she specifically sought out book clubs as her other social relationships were changing, "Other friends had married and stuff. You feel your network shrinking with couple-dom and all that. It was like I needed to get out there and start meeting new people." Marilyn, a retired special education teacher in Denver, also spoke about developing social capital. She explained, "I miss the teacher's lounge where we used to talk about different things and whatever. Just discuss what you thought about things and connect with other people to talk." Shirley, a retired CFO, spoke about the need to develop new social connections in the face of a divorce and thus newly shrunken social capital. She explained,

My husband left me three months shy of our 40th wedding anniversary, and two weeks after my father died. It was a tough, tough thing and I was totally depressed, and so that was part of my way to get out of depression and start doing some stuff and talking to other people. Because I was in my library reading all the

time just by myself to just kind of escape from being miserable and I thought, “I have got to get out and do some things with other women.”

Participation and engagement with book clubs, therefore, served to develop and maintain social capital, and represented a response to women’s experiences with shrinking social capital in adulthood.

Many interviewees spoke about the importance of reading in identity formation and development, but this was not the most important element of book clubs for the women I interviewed. At the top of the list for why women attend book clubs, in both Ireland and the United States, were the social connections and development of a sense of community with a book club. All of the women I interviewed elucidated that book clubs provide an important social outlet for them, as well as provided avenues for finding and maintaining friendships. Many women explained that the social element was so important in their lives that they attended book club even if they had not finished the book their club was reading that month. Women in Dublin and in Denver explained that the social elements of the book club were just as important, if not more important, than the actual books they read. Natasha, a 30-year-old engaged bank teller in Dublin grew up with a brother and a sister, and said she always felt very close with her family. When she moved to Dublin after college and was no longer able to spend every weekend with her family, she sought new ways to make friends. Natasha regularly attended two book clubs monthly in order to develop her social connections. She explained,

Having that sense of community around reading. It’s obviously an individual thing and you’re on your own

most of the time. It was another social event. I like that idea of being able to go and chat with other people about it.

It is clear that women sought out book clubs to fulfill social needs, and many of the women I interviewed specifically looked to book clubs to fill a very specific social niche in their social lives.

Book club members found the opportunity to meet with other women in a single-gendered environment important, and many explained that they felt more comfortable discussing topics in their book club than they would in a co-ed group or club. Cheryl, a married former teacher who now works in the publishing industry, grew up with three brothers and as a child spent more time playing with boys than with girls. As she aged, she felt she was missing out on important female relationships. Cheryl discussed the importance of women's only groups: "I just felt socially isolated and not just talking about books but I was like, I needed to meet more women who I could be friends with." Mary, a 52 year old married school teacher who participated in consciousness raising groups during the 1970s but then felt less connected to the women's movement when she raised children, explained that as she aged, women's groups and a strong sense of a female community became more and more important in her life. Mary spoke to me about the importance of the group in helping another club member, Sharon, through a particularly hostile divorce while she was battling cancer. She said,

I think I'm just real strong on women-centered groups. It's just that I've gotten huge on women's empowerment. Women helping other women, and that kind of, the power that can come from that. I guess it's just that sometimes I'll come home and Ron will say, "What did you do?" And I will say, "We solved the

world's problems, peace on earth," that kind of thing."  
But you kind of just, I guess, like it helped Sharon last month. That whole group. Sometimes I think what would she do if she didn't have us to tell us over the years. We help each other because we understand.

Some of the women I interviewed participated in both women-only and coed book clubs, but they expressed that these book clubs fulfilled different social functions.

Women who did participate in coed clubs told me they felt more comfortable talking in women's book clubs, and felt better able to express opinions that may not have adhered to the overall opinion of the group. Christine, a graduate student in Denver, worked in the tech industry prior to graduate school and was the only woman at her office. She felt comfortable around her colleagues, and told me she often felt close to her husband's friends, but realized that she did not develop deep connections with men in the way she had with women in college. Book club provided her the opportunity to develop those kinds of relationships with other women. She explained,

I hate to say that, but there's um, a level of vulnerability that people come in with, like, they make themselves vulnerable and they open up to one another. Even new people who we don't know very well, and something about that, I don't think happens in a co-ed environment.

Women's only groups seem to provide a safer environment for women to work through their understanding of and reactions to the literature they read, and even women who had never attended a coed book club told me they would not feel comfortable doing so.

### *Unique Friendships*

Most of the women I interviewed conveyed that they talked to friends or family members about reading and books. These conversations, however, were very different than the kinds of conversations women have about books in book club meetings. Conversations outside of book club were not as in-depth, and Irish and American women told me they did not always feel comfortable launching into discussions about reading with people they are not certain are avid readers. Most of the women I interviewed grew up with family members who read, so that continued connection with parents or grandparents was important, and maintained through conversations about books and reading. However, these superficial interactions about reading did not seem to meet the needs of the readers I interviewed. This is one of the reasons women told me they found book club to offer a unique opportunity to develop close relationships outside of their “normal” day-to-day life.

Women consistently told me about the unique friendships they developed in book club, often with women with whom they would not have otherwise interacted, and some developing friendships spanning decades. Rose, a widowed, retired school teacher, was a particularly unique character at the age of 80. I interviewed her daughter in Denver, and when Rose heard about my project, she was very excited to talk with me. Rose founded the oldest-known contemporary women’s book club in the United States during her time at an all-women’s college 60 years ago. I asked her what it was that kept her book club together for so long, and she explained, “It’s also a wonderful friendship that builds from these books. There’s a wonderful friendship

that comes with being together on a constant basis, because you begin to share more than just books.” Elizabeth Long’s research echoed this,

Over and over participants speak of a process that couples reflection about literature with self-reflection in the company of others who bring similar reflectiveness, but different selves, into the process. And over and over, they speak as well of the surprising closeness that emerges from this kind of talk (2003:111).

This surprising closeness is demonstrated through the moving story of Carolyn and Frances, two widowed women in their seventies. Carolyn and Frances have lived on the same block in Denver, three houses down from one another, for more than fifty years. These women raised their children and worked as a nurse and a school teacher, respectively, to support their husband’s academic and career-related pursuits. Both women expressed overall happy experiences throughout their lives, raising their families, and finding subsequent joy in their grandchildren. While these women had a great deal in common, they also did not know one another for a majority of their lives. Their paths did not cross until they both became widows and ended up joining the same book club. Frances and Carolyn did not attend the same churches, did not share the same religious beliefs, and because their husbands had very different careers, did not interact in the same social circles as one another, despite many commonalities in their experiences. After a few years of attending book club together and speaking to one another a bit more in the neighborhood when Frances was out for her daily five-mile walks, Carolyn was diagnosed with stage-four breast cancer and had to undergo a double mastectomy. Frances, at a regular book club meeting, asked Carolyn if there was anything she could do to help. Carolyn felt embarrassed, but decided that Frances’s proximity could come in



handy. After considering it for a couple of weeks, and realizing that she could not do it alone, Carolyn asked Frances to help her with her required daily massage to help manage painful scar tissue and related side effects of the major surgery. Frances and Carolyn spent hours together each day as Carolyn underwent difficult and painful rehabilitation. At first, the friends told me, they used their common ground of book club and discussions about books to help alleviate the potential embarrassment of the situation. As time went on, the friends began what they referred to as their own “mini book club” and had in-depth, very personal discussions about the books they had been reading together. The bond created for Carolyn and Frances was clearly unique. In fact, they even requested that they be interviewed together, in case they missed or forgot something the other one might recall. Frances and Carolyn frequently completed one another’s sentences during our interview, and their close-knit friendship was undeniable. These women, who would have never met one another, and would not have developed a relationship, thus developed an intensely close friendship, and one they credit their book club for helping them form. Not only did the book club provide a way for women undergoing a major life transition, from that of married women to widows, to relate to one another and their new social position, but it also created an intense bond between a cancer survivor and her close friend. Book clubs allowed women to develop deep, meaningful friendships with women they would not have met otherwise.

This is not to say that every woman I interviewed felt they developed close friendships with all members of their book clubs. Social interactions do not necessarily always go smoothly and not every member of a book club developed

close friendships with other members. Many women, in Ireland and in the US, talked about the “nature” of women’s groups. Corinne, a 27 year-old single law student in Denver, told me she often struggled to connect with other women, and only had a few very close female friends. She explained,

I think sometimes it can be awesome when a group of women are very supportive of each other and I think that’s what I really like and that’s great. But sometimes women are more judgmental with other women particularly and that can be hard.

Corrine’s explanation of difficult female relationships was not unique, and many women told me they worried about interpersonal difficulties existing in women’s groups. Polleck’s (2010) study of young women’s reading groups examined, in part, the ways adolescent women utilized narratives of female friendships, fraught with difficulty and pain, to frame their own friendships. In this way we can see that women may utilize fictional accounts in literature to frame their experiences. That said, while many women talked of the difficulties of female friendships and female groups, they were not able to recall or tell me about these kinds of difficulties in their own book clubs. American and Irish women believed, and utilized literature to perpetuate this belief, that social groups of women would be inherently “catty” or difficult. Women used examples from books, ranging from fairy tales to murder mysteries, about conniving, “backstabbing” characters or women who slept with the spouses of their friends, and regularly referenced commonly held knowledge about “how women are.” Even when their own lived experiences did not match this construction, women continued to adhere to the cultural expectation of difficult female relationships. However, in my research, both in the stories women told me

and in the book club meetings I attended, I was not able to identify any of these challenging social interactions. Instead, women spoke politely to one another, engaged in disagreements about concepts, ideas, and interpretations, but remained friendly during book club meetings, even when discussions seemed to involve deeply personal differences in politics or ideologies.

Overall, women's book clubs, and the friendships developed therein, do not serve simply as an avenue to expand one's social circle, although the women I interviewed explained that these aspects are incredibly important. These social interactions, and the processes of shared reading and working through texts, provided a new way for women to relate to one another, and to the social world outside of book club while developing social capital and maintaining important social networks. Contemporary book clubs have, in many ways, continued a longstanding history of middle and upper-middle class women participating in the production of knowledge and developing high cultural literacy. Yet, the implications of reading groups go far beyond educational and interpersonal relationships. In subsequent chapters, I will examine the ways book clubs I studied in Ireland and in the United States played a role in the development and enactment of sexuality and desire, worked to create and confer status, and helped women navigate their gendered sexual identity in the context of longstanding, but changing, social institutions.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **CULTURAL CAPITAL, STATUS, AND WOMEN'S BOOK CLUBS**

The themes of status and cultural capital attainment were at the heart of numerous conversations I had with women readers and book club members. A special social status came with reading for avid readers and book club members. This status was, in many ways, self-conferred, but also perpetuated by spending time with others who place equal value on the meaning of reading and talking about literature. Central to discussions of status and reading is the notion of taste and cultural boundaries. Discussions of taste also shed light on how and why readers classify literature in particular ways. In order to examine the ways status became apparent throughout my interviews, I will discuss the exclusionary nature of an “us-them” dichotomy in considering reading habits of interviewees in comparison to the reading habits of others. The differences between American and Irish women I interviewed became clear throughout this research. While status and taste were important to women in both countries, the cultural capital attained through reading and participation in book clubs was more important to American women, and remained a central theme prompting participation in book clubs, particularly as it related to maintaining a capital portfolio, or multiple forms of capital exhibited through habitus, in the field of romantic relationships. Irish and American women utilized their experiences with reading and book clubs to build cultural capital and socially locate themselves in terms of taste and status.

Within cultural sociology, the influence of socioeconomic status on cultural “taste” has been well studied (Bennett et al. 2009; Bourdieu 1984; DiMaggio 1987;

Erikson 1996; Lamont 1992). Matters of taste are linked to the perpetuation of cultural habitus through socialization within a particular class. Bourdieu's (1993) work demonstrated the influence of education on taste, particularly as it relates to cultural tolerance. Specifically, more educated members of society tend towards more cultural exclusivity, including in matters of literary consumption (Bourdieu 1993). Subsequent research has challenged this assumption, particularly with regard to taste in popular culture, such as popular music. Yet, even research on musical taste concedes that cultural tolerance exists within specific limitations. Genres with fans that are traditionally less well educated (like country music) are more likely than other forms of music to be rejected by those who consider themselves to be musically tolerant (Bryson 1996). Within cultural sociology, there is consensus that social status does affect cultural tastes, and that cultural taste affects our social status (Lamont 1992; Lamont and Fournier 1993; Lizardo 2006; Schultz and Breiger 2010; Vaisey and Lizardo 2010). This linkage of taste to cultural and socioeconomic status is present for fiction readers as well, regarding what and when people choose to read, and even how reading for pleasure is even defined (Griswold 2008; Griswold et al. 2005; Tepper 2000). Additionally, how readers perceive a text, and how readers interpret what they read, is clearly linked to connection with a particular social group or standing (DeVault 1990; Lauristin 2014). The social position of the women I interviewed clearly played a part in what they chose to read and how they interpreted the texts they read, both in and out of book club.

## CLASS, EXCLUSION, AND STATUS

It is necessary to examine the relative invisibility of class, education, and status to the club members I interviewed before beginning a discussion about reading, book clubs, and status. In both the United States and Ireland, a majority of the population is composed of the white middle class. Whiteness and class-based privilege are both normalized and normative so that the racial identity of whites remains invisible and taken for granted (Newman 2013; Wise 2002). The juxtaposition of class, education, and privilege with women's experiences with reading and book clubs in Dublin and in Denver cannot be overlooked. Every woman I interviewed was college-educated, and many of these women had attained, or were in the process of attaining, higher degrees. This is not unlike other research about book clubs, in that education is a common undercurrent of contemporary book clubs (Griswold et al. 2005; Long 2003). Additionally, and as discussed previously, all but one of my interviewees were white women. Lisa, a software engineer in Dublin who identified as biracial, explained to me that because she had very light skin, she never felt like a minority and did not find race an issue in her day-to-day life. Lisa believed that to be her experience because of her light skin, her financial status as a child in a well-off family, and because she had been born in Ireland. She explained that racism was certainly a problem for many people in Ireland, and she believed this to be particularly true for African immigrants, but not for herself. Every one of the women I interviewed self-identified as heterosexual. Again, it is possible that women who did not easily relate to me, upon initial

meetings, did not come forward to participate in interviews. Yet, it is clear this was more than simply the effect of my role as a researcher.

None of the groups I met had specific, exclusionary criteria for membership. In fact, many of the women I spoke to expressed that they particularly appreciated the “diversity” in their book clubs. This initially seemed incongruent, given the predominantly white, educated, middle- and upper-class makeup of the book clubs I studied, but reflects the previously discussed invisibility of race- and class-based privilege in women’s reading groups. Over time, I came to recognize that the word “diversity,” for the women I interviewed, reflected not a diversity of class, education, sexual orientation, or even race or ethnicity. As explicated by Lauren, in her mid-forties and employed in the publishing industry in Denver, when I asked her to tell me more about the “diversity” she mentioned in her book club, “It’s a really good group of women who do different things and they’re not all republicans or democrats, it’s sort of a mix so you get different viewpoints.” In this way, it appeared that women considered growing up in different cities, attending different schools and pursuing different careers, and even differing political leanings, to provide an important diversity in their club. Certainly, this is one kind of diversity, but it is diversity within a very narrow contextual frame. Cultural assumptions and exclusions take place in contemporary women’s book clubs through this notion of diversity. Elizabeth Long explained,

Whether in the nineteenth or in the twenty-first century, they [reading groups] have also pragmatically drawn a boundary around themselves that excludes women who do not find literary discussion an easy or pleasurable activity. Nonreaders (and even occasional readers!) need not apply. Practically as well as

conceptually, the “boundary work” of reading groups has separated them from other women whose educational or social backgrounds would make them uncomfortable discussing books. Literature becomes a cultural marker for distinction. As such, it may provide part of the cultural, even moral, undergirding for the almost utopian feeling of specialness that has tended to pervade reading groups, a counterpoint to the liberatory experience of discussing books among peers, which also makes them special occasions (2003:61).

This distinction reinforces the status attainment of literary engagement for women.

Many studies have examined the ways women readers have specifically engaged highbrow literature in order to “read up” or attain benefits of high cultural capital (Blair 2012; Mitchell 2005). Thus, while book clubs can provide many benefits, such as increasing the confidence of women involved and allowing women to navigate and negotiate their own identities and place in the social world, they do so only for select people, primarily middle and upper-middle class, heterosexual, well-educated white women.

It is important to examine the relationship between class and cultural capital in this context. As discussed previously, education and family background are linked to increased cultural capital. Individuals with cultural capital recognize the valued and dominant cultural codes and are able to engage in activities like visiting museums, attending the opera, or reading difficult texts. A lifetime of socialization in a privileged environment allowed the women I interviewed to acquire cultural capital through their education and through engaging with cultural objects like books. This same cultural consumption is not accessible or relevant to individuals without the same background. This process, in turn, reinforces an ideology that those with high levels of cultural capital, like the women I interviewed who spoke



about reading difficult texts and engaging highbrow literary criticism, are “naturally” intelligent or gifted, which perpetuates status attainment. This cultural capital is uniquely attainable for women who have access to, and cultural knowledge of, what are considered legitimate literature and reading habits. In this way, we can clearly identify the relationship between privilege and status attainment. The benefits of book clubs, then, serve to reinforce status and maintain boundaries between readers and non-readers, without a necessary examination of the structural elements and inherent privilege that play a role in creating readers.

One important difference that became apparent throughout my research was the concept that being a reader and a book club member conferred a particular kind of status, especially for the American women I interviewed. In American interviews, the status of being known as a reader, and the assumed characteristics of that were important, as exhibited by Anna when she said, “You know, are you a reader or are you somebody who sits and watches TV?” American women explained that being known as someone who reads says something particularly important about an individual’s character, and strengthens how one is perceived by important others. Being recognized as a person who regularly engaged in an intellectual activity was considerably important to the women I interviewed in the United States. For example, one interviewee, Michelle, in her late twenties, decided to join a book club specifically so that she would be forced to read more and could better portray her intellectualism. Michelle enjoyed outdoor activities and worked as a ski instructor during the winters, but felt it important to demonstrate that she had intellectual interests as well. She explained, “I wanted to be a little more literary, feel like I was a

little bit more cultured.” As Karen, a young-adult author in her mid-thirties, explained,

If you're a person who is well read, I think people tend to think of that, for the people who are well read as being intelligent, having a more refined worldview. And so, I'd like to be somebody with that kind of worldview.

Anna echoed Karen's sentiment. Anna grew up in an academic family. Anna's mother was a college professor, and her father a school superintendent, and as a child she was encouraged to spend free time reading. She said, “I think that I identify intelligence with reading. I think that's how I acquaint it, and so I see myself as somebody who reads and ergo, is, intelligent.” Corinne, a 27-year-old law student, explained to me that a big part of the reason she joined two book clubs was so that when she eventually entered the job market and began working at a law firm, her colleagues would know she was an intellectual and thus think more highly of her. In this way, American interviewees were actively pursuing cultural capital attainment, recognizing the implications for capital conversion and increased status. Irish women, too, found elements of the status associated with literary consumption important, but it was not something they indicated they actively pursued to that end. American interviewees were clear about the cultural and social implications of their image as active participants in the literary world.

Identification as a member of a book club, in itself, did not necessarily seem important to a majority of the women I worked with, in Dublin and in Denver, in terms of being central to their own identity or sense of self. At the same time, these women expressed that when people knew they were members of a book club, they made assumptions about them as “serious” or “real” readers, and this was important

for club members. Many cultural practices reinforce status of those engaging in particular activities, particularly when differentiating between “high” and “low” culture, and cultural taste itself reflects social status (Aschaffenburg and Maas 1997; Bryson 1996; DiMaggio 1997; Eastwood 2007; Gans 2008; Griswold et al. 2005; Lamont 1992). Book club meetings allowed readers to maintain and confer status through demonstrating literary taste, engaging in reading, and conversing in an in-depth way about reading, which women expressed as an element of highbrow culture and thus status achievement.

### *Partner Selection*

Women in the United States expressed that being a book club member was something that “looks good” and helped them to find the right mate for the future. The focus on the relevance of book clubs and reading in setting parameters for finding or keeping a heterosexual partner was central for many of the American women I interviewed, and unique in that women in Ireland did not associate their reading activity or book club participation with partner selection. Claire, a 27-year old woman in a non-monogamous relationship and actively dating told me, “I would never date a man who doesn’t read, so it better be pretty obvious that reading is important to me, that I *really* read, you know?” Corinne, also 27, explained that she made the choice to get involved with reading and book clubs so that she could have more success in finding a long-term partner and eventual husband. Corinne told me that reading “makes you a more interesting person, I think at least, and that’s how I want to be known,” because being “interesting” increased one’s attractiveness in the

dating market. Corinne made sure to include her love of reading and her involvement with book clubs on her online dating profile in the hopes that potential dates would find her more appealing. I wanted to better understand the importance of reading in the mate selection of the women I interviewed, so I asked women to elaborate when they broached the subject. Karen, 36, a young adult author who married at the age of 34, talked to me about the years she spent dating. She explained, "I guess I just get let down when I'm dating someone and they don't enjoy reading." April, a single graphic designer, was a child in a family with multiple divorces. She felt her parents hastily remarried new spouses after they divorced, without learning what was important to them in a partner, only to eventually divorce again. She told me that reading "is a very important trait for somebody that I would ever want to be in a relationship with." This was not only true for the younger women I interviewed, as exhibited by the conversation I had with Shirley, a divorced woman in her late sixties, and retired CFO. Shirley said, in speaking of a man she had dated but decided to stop dating after realizing he was not interested in reading, "he was watching television constantly, stuff like Gilligan's Island reruns even, and I was like, this is just not attractive!" American interviewees acknowledged the importance of literature consumption in their own social position, but also the importance that they be linked romantically with men who also had similar tastes and levels of cultural capital, as exhibited through active engagement with literature. Thus, while reading was certainly important as a past time for American women, and conferred specific status, it was also imperative to avoid readers and

book club members in the United States that their romantic partners were also interested in reading and discussing the books they read.

Women in Ireland explained that reading was important to them and they enjoyed talking about literature with friends and romantic partners. However, Irish interviewees did not place this level of importance on presumed character traits associated with reading in their romantic relationships. In fact, often in direct contrast to the American interviews, many of the Irish women I interviewed told me their friends or partners did not enjoy reading, or did not read much, and that they sought out book clubs to develop likeminded friendships and discuss books in the absence of this connection in their romantic relationships. When I asked Irish women if this bothered them, they responded nonchalantly, and told me they just found other ways to relate to their partners or potential partners. As Kate, a 31-year old in the publishing industry explained, when I asked if her husband was an avid reader, “Jaysus, no! My husband, he would never pick up a book! He sees me reading, sometimes he asks what I am reading about, but he wouldn’t really be bothered.” While many Irish women told me they encouraged their friends and romantic partners to read, it was because they personally found great enjoyment in reading, and not because of the status implications. In this sense, reading as a central piece of a partner, or potential partner’s, identity was not important to the Irish women I interviewed, as it was uniquely important to American women’s book club members.

## A MATTER OF TASTE

Conversations around taste, addressed through discussions about literature choice and reading habits, focused primarily on what kind of books interviewees chose to read. Additionally, these conversations revolved around perceptions women had about non-readers, or readers of, as Leah, an interviewee in Denver, called it, “shit-lit.” First, I will address the current cultural debate about good and bad literature, particularly as it relates to women’s popular fiction. Second, I will examine the discussions of literature and reading choice through exploring how readers identified their own reading choices. Finally, I will discuss how interviewees conceptualized the reading habits of others and the relevance of classifying not only literature, but identifying practices that reinforce one’s social and cultural positionality and status.

Previous research demonstrates that people with high social and cultural status are more likely to consider themselves cultural omnivores than snobs who only consume highbrow culture (DiMaggio and Mukhtar 2004; DiMaggio and Useem 1978; Lizardo and Skiles 2008). A cultural omnivore references a person who has high cultural capital and is able to access highbrow culture, but also participates in a broader spectrum of cultural consumption, including mainstream or popular culture. Recent research examined the ways cultural omnivores engage lowbrow culture, and continually construct boundaries between valuable cultural consumption, and “guilty pleasures” or less valuable consumption (McCoy and Scarborough 2014; Warde et al. 2007). Women’s book club members exemplified this process through continual distinction. Interviewees themselves drew

distinctions between the reading and cultural consumption they did that, while omnivorous in nature, was less important than the significant, literary consumption in which they engaged through book clubs and in their own reading.

### *Classifying Literature*

Every woman I interviewed told me about the kinds of books she read, and each interviewee drew lines between what they read and what they considered to be less literarily valuable. In this way, women were able to engage in significant boundary work and differentiate between their reading interests, and the less desirable interests of popular culture. In particular, women responded to the cultural connotation of the often derogatorily used “chick lit” genre. While “chick lit” is now primarily referenced in popular culture as women’s fiction, the progression of the nomenclature and the lasting legacy is important and continued to be relevant for interviewees. Called a “pandemic” by *The New York Times*, the popularity of chick lit across the globe soared during the late 1990s and early 2000s, “buoyed by the demographic that’s both their subject and readership: 20- and 30-something women with full-time jobs, discretionary income and a hunger for independence and glamour” (Donadio 2006:43). Chick lit is a term originally developed ironically by Cris Mazza, a fiction author and professor at University of Illinois, in the early 1990s to reference alternative, “postfeminist” fiction rejected by the publishing industry (Mazza 2000). Mazza edited two volumes, *Chick-Lit: Postfeminist Fiction* (1995) and *Chick-Lit 2* (1996), of short stories that greatly differ from the chick lit popular

today.<sup>17</sup> At the same time Mazza was working on postfeminist fiction, *Bridget Jones's Diary* (Fielding 1999) was published in Britain and quickly became a best seller in worldwide markets. This fiction, however, bore little resemblance to the postfeminist works within Mazza's volumes.<sup>18</sup> Chick lit is readily identified by the novel covers, often pink or other pastel colors, with cursive fonts and line drawings depicting bags, shoes, or makeup (Gill and Herieckerhoff 2006). Interviewees spoke to me about identifying such literature based solely on the cover alone when determining what books to purchase. Those who publish in the genre describe chick lit as "young, female empowerment stories that may or may not have a romantic element" (Danford 2003:18). Although made up of various storylines, chick lit follows a somewhat standard development: female lead characters, often single or newly single, seek fulfillment of their dreams and goals, delivered through a comedic romance, with an important focus on consumerism and status (Knowles 2004). However, bestselling author Jennifer Weiner explains that chick lit is "more profound than being about boys and shopping. It's more, how do I fit in the world? It's big questions that mean a lot to a lot of people" (Hearn Hill 2006:29). While some stories focus on romantic, heterosexual love as an endpoint, many best-selling works end up with a single protagonist and success measured not through finding a mate, but instead through personal fulfillment.

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<sup>17</sup> Mazza's collections focus on less-traditional women's stories, avoid what she calls "vic-lit" or stories in which women are portrayed as victims, and focuses on "experimental fiction" rather than the "whiny" feminist works that she saw as problematic before her collected works (Frangello 1997).

<sup>3</sup> In fact, *Bridget Jones's Diary* is a book that Mazza refers to as one of many "airhead-girl books" (Mazza 2000).



Since exploding in the late 1990s, the chick lit genre has continued to grow, and its titles consistently remain on bestseller lists. Responding to demand worldwide for more diversity than the stereotypical, upper-middle class white young woman, publishers are adding sub-genres like South Asian American Chick lit, Chica Lit and Sistah-Lit in which “characters’ engagements with femininity and gender are often articulated through questions of race, nation, ethnicity, and socioeconomic class” (Butler and Desai 2008:4), but these remain minimal compared to a majority of chick lit books centered around white characters. Additionally sub-genres include a range of elements from “mom lit” and faith-based chick lit to “Widow Lit” (Danford 2003, 2004a). More recently, publishers have embraced work by authors who themselves hold doctorates and write about graduate school, research, and the search for happiness (Baker 2003). The push for diversity within the genre indicates that chick lit readers are not a homogenous group. Overall, however, chick lit readers are predominantly white women in their 20s and 30s who work full time and are strongly career-oriented, live in urban environments, and do not have children (Gormley 2009; Harzewski 2011).

Despite its overwhelming popularity and economic profitability, chick lit is not highly regarded, critically, within the publishing world. Industry insiders lament that “serious” fiction is in decline (Nelson 2006). Chick lit has long been lumped into the broader framework of “women’s fiction” or “women’s genre fiction” and thus minimized within the publishing industry as non-literary. “Commercial women’s fiction has always gotten a bad rap from those on the literary-minded side of publishing,” and chick lit is no exception, with good reviews often bearing the caveat

that the work is good “for chick lit” (Jacobs 2005:58). At the same time, the industry recognizes a money-making opportunity, and in some cases novels previously released (a few years or even a few decades prior) are re-released under the chick lit moniker (Danford 2004b). Though not embraced among literary critics, chick lit remains at the foreground of contemporary women’s publishing and literary consumption and remains relevant to many readers’ lives.

The derision of women’s fiction by the publishing industry, and particularly by male gatekeepers in the industry, even while it generates a great deal of revenue, is not new (Radway 1984). Women’s popular fiction is often labeled “trashy” and receives criticism for its lack of worth (Deller and Smith 2013; McCracken 1998; Morey 2012; Whelehan 1994). The contemporary debate about whether or not women’s fiction is “real” literature, or worth discussing, continues. One of the more public ways this debate has played out is through the ongoing, well-publicized “feud” between award winning novelist Jonathan Franzen and bestselling author Jennifer Weiner.<sup>19</sup> Franzen, whose work is critically acclaimed, with recent work garnering him the title “Great American Writer” by *Time Magazine*,<sup>20</sup> has been subject of great controversy since Oprah chose his novel, *The Corrections* (2001), for inclusion on the 2001 Oprah’s Book Club book list. Franzen reportedly was not incredibly thrilled about being selected for the club, and was instead wary of associating with Oprah’s even though its inclusion on the list would guarantee large sales and profit. The author seemed particularly uncomfortable with allowing his

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<sup>19</sup> A debate dubbed “Franzenfreude” by Weiner to indicate the larger cultural issues surrounding the overwhelming support for white male authors at the expense of other, potentially equally talented, women writers.

<sup>20</sup> <http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,20100823,00.html>

book to bear the logo of Oprah's Book Club because of the influence it might have on male readers. In an interview on NPR, Franzen explained,

It was so unexpected that I was almost not surprised... partly because she does choose a lot of female authors, and partly because as the reviewer in *The New York Times* said, this is too edgy to ever be an Oprah pick... So much of reading is sustained in this country, I think, by the fact that women read while men are off golfing or watching football on TV or playing with their flight simulator... I continue to believe that, and now, I'm actually at the point with this book that I worry... I had some hope of actually reaching a male audience, and I've heard more than one reader in signing lines now in bookstores that said, "If I hadn't heard you, I would have been put off by the fact that it is an Oprah pick. I figure those books are for women and I would never touch it." Those are male readers speaking. So, I'm a little confused about the whole thing now (Gross 2001).

The author's public discomfort with the "Oprah" label led Oprah Winfrey to rescind her invitation for *The Corrections* inclusion on her book club list. Franzen's derision for commercial fiction, and particularly women's fiction, has seemingly continued in subsequent interviews, including a February 2015 interview with the Butler University literary journal *Booth* in which he explained that people read commercial fiction, as opposed to literary fiction, because

That's the last thing you'd want if you've had a hard day. You want to be told *good people are good, bad people are bad, and love conquers all. And love is more important than money.* You know, all these schmaltzy tropes (Lerner 2015).

It would be easy to deride Franzen as merely one particularly negative individual, but his approach to and understanding of literature is not unique. Indeed, as previously discussed, the publishing industry is dominated by white men, and the publishing industry serves as an important gatekeeper, determining "good" vs. "bad"

literature, and often minimizing women's fiction as not literary and therefore less worthy of acclaim or attention.<sup>21</sup>

Jennifer Weiner writes popular women's fiction and her novels have repeatedly been on *The New York Times* bestseller list. Weiner has long been outspoken about the inequality within the publishing industry, particularly as it relates to gender inequality and the perpetuation of white men as "real" writers, and women otherwise. Weiner has argued on multiple occasions that *The New York Times* book reviews actively perpetuate these gendered, patriarchal standards, as men's fiction, including genre fiction like detective stories, horror, and science fiction, are regularly reviewed, while women's fiction is not.<sup>22</sup> In a 2010 interview, Weiner explained,

I think it's a very old and deep-seated double standard that holds that when a man writes about family and feelings, it's literature with a capital L, but when a woman considers the same topics, it's romance, or a beach book – in short, it's something unworthy of a serious critic's attention. ... I think it's irrefutable that when it comes to picking favorites – those lucky few writers who get the double reviews AND the fawning magazine profile AND the back-page essay space AND the op-ed ... the Times tends to pick white guys (Pinter 2010).

Weiner consistently addresses this issue of gender inequality in publishing and in cultural constructions of women's fiction. These issues clearly go beyond a simple feud between two authors, and speak to a deeper issue in the literary world, where the dominant group, that is, wealthy white men, perpetuate and reinforce this

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<sup>21</sup> See, for example, "The Count," <http://www.vidaweb.org/the-count-2010/> and "Women at Work: A New Tally Shows How Few Female Writers Appear in Magazines," [http://www.slate.com/articles/double\\_x/doublex/2011/02/women\\_at\\_work.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/double_x/doublex/2011/02/women_at_work.html)

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, "Written Off" <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/01/13/written-off>

dominance through cultural constructions of quality literature and commercial fiction (Deller and Smith 2013). Men's response to women's fiction

tends towards amusement or finding them [women's films] unwatchable or unreadable... Women's texts are often devalued, seen as dangerous, spiritually diminishing, or culturally toxic. From the romance novel to women's cult films such as *Dirty Dancing*, what women like has often been defined as the most tediously vanilla and escapist mass culture, not only by men but also by women in relation to their class and acquired cultural capital (Hunter 2013:971).

These actions continually perpetuate the invisibility of privilege and the inaccessibility of high cultural capital for all but the most privileged.

The theme of women writers being conferred lower literary status compared to male writers was one that came up regularly in my interviews. Claire, 27, a Denver school librarian, grew up with a single mother, and worked hard in school throughout her childhood, adolescence, and college so that she would not have to struggle to make ends meet the way her mother had. She recalled feeling bad when her mother worked two or three jobs, and vowed to find a career path that allowed her the freedom to make ends meet and have the time and financial ability to enjoy her life. At the same time, she valued her mother's demonstration that women could be independent and capable, and she told me she felt grateful she was raised by a single mother so that she had the opportunity to experience possibilities outside traditional American family ideals. She explained her frustration with the male literary canon emphatically:

The one thing I will say is that there is very much a gender bias when it comes to book clubs. You don't see men coming together to talk about books. I hate that idea, mostly because most books that are heralded as

the best books are written by men. Even the ones, like I read about Jonathan Franzen's book and it is a family story, but it is heralded as this sort of amazing story, and I'm like, I've read so many different family stories by women! I could think of *The Thornbirds*, which was a great book, and that was all centered around this family legacy and generation, but if Jonathan Franzen writes it, it's all about the environment and a family's relationship, it's heralded as being a great book of the year. It's just, I hate that so much! The canon is so very male. They forget that most people that tend to read books are predominantly female. So, the people who make this be the best book of the year are really women, but they're never heralded as the ones who actually make it.

Women in book club meetings were also engaging this cultural debate. Women, Reading, and Wine, a Denver area book club, read Franzen's (2001) book, *The Corrections*, and during the club meeting they echoed this sentiment.<sup>23</sup> Club members enjoyed the text, but did not understand why it was heralded as a quintessential American novel. They felt that Franzen was not able to relate to female readers or female characters, and club members found this alienating. These women compared the book to others they had read, and agreed that some of the female authors they read for book club more accurately depicted the life of women and families. During this discussion, women wondered aloud why those books had not garnered as much critical acclaim. The women I interviewed found book club a way to engage literature and authors that did not necessarily reap public commendation, even if well-written or considered literary by the mainstream publishing industry. Interviewees explained that this was important because it became a way, as Lisa, an Irish software engineer explained, for "us to have a voice

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<sup>23</sup> One of the club members in attendance requested I not record this book club meeting, and thus I do not have excerpts from women's conversations. I relied on my field notes for this discussion.

and hear more from women writers who are writing so much more than Mills and Boon.”<sup>24</sup>

At the same time, while discussing the problematic nature of labeling women’s fiction as such, interviewees expressed disdain for the “chick-lit” trend within the publishing industry and in popular culture. Though a large majority of the women I interviewed reminisced about the time they spent during late adolescence and their early twenties devouring books that fit the chick-lit nomenclature, women also made sure to explain to me that those kinds of books were not “real” literature. This became a clear way women identified their own status as readers and differentiated themselves from more casual readers. Niamh, a Dublin office manager, single and 26 years of age, explained, “I like fiction, but a little bit more high brow than the chick-lit stuff, which I really have very little time for unless I’m on holidays and totally switched off.” Alice, 31 years of age and a school teacher in Denver, said,

I liked them, I mean, I guess I still do, but I wouldn’t consider them literature or anything like that. I could go through them in a day or a couple of days. Then something that I get more out of just takes longer.

In this sense, women book club construct boundaries around the amount of time and effort engaged in “real” reading. The material an author writes about matters, but so does the time required to work through a text. The difficulty one may have engaging a particular book, was, for many readers, indication of a high quality, worthwhile read. Literature choice, and participation in a hobby that is not solely

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<sup>24</sup> Mills and Boon is a popular British women’s fiction publishing house, often publishing emphatically “chick-lit” novels.

about pleasure, but also about learning, engaging, and working to better oneself remained important for all of the women I interviewed. This is not entirely surprising, considering the historical linkages between women's pastimes and cultural assumptions about wasting time and frivolous femininity:

Like female sexuality, and unpaid female work outside the marketplace ("What did you *do* all day?"), female reading requires surveillance. It is especially dangerous, perhaps, because it is about consumption and pleasure, and often about sexuality and romance, which women "should" be getting inside the socially legitimated structures of the family and the real world. Women's reading, both as an activity and as content (fiction, stereotypically romance fiction), threatens because it represents escape and holds forth at least the possibility of subverting the structures that discipline our lives (Long 2003:13).

Women seemed to engage and participate in this cultural surveillance by, at least publicly, reading "real" literature, or as Heather put it, "not junk, not Harlequin romances." This engagement with highbrow literature continually conferred female readers status as legitimate readers, not wasting time with frivolity, but it also served to reinforce norms and cultural assumptions about women readers, in general.

The women's discussion of literature choice also served to legitimate women's time spent at book clubs. Certainly, this legitimation has been important for women's groups throughout history, and the interest in remaining culturally relevant, and more than, in Grace's words, "just a bunch of hens chatting it up" remains a part of the status-work undertaken by women's book clubs. In book clubs where a lighter text was discussed, it was often assigned as a second book for



members to read only if they had time. Deenah, a 38-year-old, unmarried Denver veterinarian in a serious relationship, explained the books her club chose:

We don't really go for popular reading; I'll put it that way. If you're in a book club, you want to read something that's discussable, that brings something to you. There are too many good things being written and too many good authors out there that you don't want to miss those when you're reading something that's popular and not going to take your life to another level.

The equivocation with popular culture and lower status was yet another way that women's book clubs engaged in boundary work. This boundary work, which I will subsequently discuss further, served multiple purposes. First, it was important for these groups to draw distinct lines between the reading and discussions in which they engaged, and less-intellectual reading for pure pleasure, which seemed to be the common cultural expectation for female readers – even the women I interviewed seemed to think that their own reading habits were very different from the “normal” reading habits of women. Second, making a clear distinction between “holiday” reading and reading that is intellectual or scholastic in nature served to help women's book clubs maintain a confident, culturally relevant and legitimate voice for women readers.

### *Analyzing Others' Reading Habits*

The legitimization of women's reading groups, and time spent with literature and in book club meetings, continued through the ways the interviewees spoke about other people's reading choices and habits. Analyzing others' reading habits and choices came up more often in American interviews, and seemed more

prevalent as a theme for the American women I interviewed, but this was also important in Irish interviews, albeit somewhat less blatantly. Amber, 32, an office manager in Denver, said, “look, honestly, if somebody doesn't read, I do judge them.” Heather, aged sixty-five, divorced, who identified herself as a retired homemaker, echoed Amber’s sentiment, “I have a really difficult time comprehending why people don’t read, I really do! I think you’re kind of missing something inside.” Not only were avid readers making judgments about people who do not read, they were making assumptions about the “kind” of people who don’t read. Women also expressed thoughts about people who read certain things, but were not what they would consider “real” readers, such as in discussions of people who read magazines. Maria, 29, single and working in public policy for a Colorado nonprofit said, “I hate to say this, but I judge people who are like “oh, I never read books, I only read *US Weekly*” or something like that.” Rachel, a married business analyst in Dublin echoed, “Well, with magazine readers, they wouldn’t read anything else.” The disdain for magazines seemed to be a piece of disdain for pop-cultural consumption overall, as expressed by women talking about television. Particularly, women made judgments about the character of people who chose to watch television instead of reading. Anne, a 50-year-old married office assistant outside of Dublin, had been an avid reader as long as she could remember. She remembered hours spent with her grandmother, who taught her to read, and vividly recalled working through reading difficult words as the books she read with her grandmother increased in difficulty. She explained, “Somebody who just plops down and watches a TV show, which is even worse than a movie, is, I just don’t see a lot of thinking going on there. It’s

probably my stereotype, but I have that." Many echoed Anne's assessment, like Laura, a Denver native and a social worker. Laura grew up as the only child of a single mother who married when Laura was 15 years old. Because of this, Laura said she often felt lonely as a child, and sought ways to keep herself busy. Even when her mother married, she felt disconnected from her new family, and she spent countless hours reading alone in her bedroom. Laura said, "I vastly prefer reading over television. I think television rots your brain whereas reading grows it." Book club members in the United States and in Ireland were maintaining boundaries and demonstrating cultural capital through not only their own consumption, but through the responses they had to the cultural consumption of others.

## BOUNDARY WORK

Literature choice, cultural consumption, and status are linked to the construction and maintenance of symbolic boundaries. These boundaries can be seen by examining the patterns of who people associate with and how. These symbolic boundaries have meaning when a particular group or class agrees upon the meaning and importance of said boundaries. In book clubs, and in discussions of reading in general, women constructed symbolic boundaries that legitimated their own reading choices and the importance of reading as more than a simple hobby or way to waste time. Instead, reading served to increase knowledge and build cultural capital.

Lamont and Molnar (2002) argued that symbolic boundaries are the most meaningful when they are constructed in opposition to another, specific group, as

opposed to multiple groups. The women I interviewed specifically constructed boundaries between themselves as serious readers, and those who don't read or read non-literary works as one social category. This served to maintain status, as "pressures to evaluate ones' own group positively through in-group/out-group comparison lead social groups to attempt to differentiate themselves from each other" (Tajfel and Turner 1985:17). Additional research demonstrates that favoritism within one's group is a central element for maintenance of a particular social status. Of course, these boundaries are shaped by both the cultural context in which they are constructed and the cultural narratives people have access to as part of their cultural repertoire (Lamont and Thévenot 2000; Somers 1993; Swidler 2001). Dominant cultural groups reinforce, legitimate, and reproduce what is considered to have cultural value (Bourdieu 1984). As cultural elements are legitimated, the practices and boundaries constructed by social groups classify and construct social boundaries.

We can examine the way reading groups classify literature as "good" literature or "trashy" novels through Bourdieu's (1984) discussion of "classification struggles." The way groups work to classify the reading they do can serve to demonstrate the high-cultural value of a particular act or point of view, namely, engaging in "real" reading that is worthwhile, and demonstrates interest in maintenance of cultural capital, as expressed by Erin, a 42 year old married nurse in Dublin,

There's that disconnect there, because I hate that shit. I won't read, I mean, I won't even go see a chick lit film, let alone read it. If I'm going to spend money, I'm going

to spend my time, and I want to really enjoy it and get something back from it.

At the same time, cultural boundaries are permeable, and breadth of cultural knowledge and interests is important for upper-middle class groups (Bryson 1996; Erickson 1996; Peterson and Kern 1996). This explains why, while women drew distinct lines between reading that is worthwhile and not worthwhile, i.e., real literature vs. chick-lit, women also expressed interests in wide-ranging literatures, writing styles, and genres. Cultural legitimization and boundary work conducted within women's book clubs, both in the United States and in Ireland, served to legitimate women's reading, which has long been delegitimized as frivolous or meaningless leisure time, in direct opposition to the men's literary consumption and production (Radway 1984). While many readers made assumptions about the meaning of reading or engaged what they believed to be "wrong" with people who do not read, women did not seem to consider the privileges linked to opportunities for developing long-term reading habits, and engaging in cultural activities that conferred positive cultural status.

In conclusion, women in both the United States and in Ireland utilized reading and book clubs to develop and strengthen cultural capital. Participation in book clubs allowed women to situate themselves specifically in the larger cultural framework, particularly as it related to cultural exclusivity, privilege, and status. While this was important for American and Irish women, it played a unique role for American women, who used not only their own status as well-read, literary individuals, but also the status of potential mates as consumers of appropriate, well-regarded culture, like literature, in determining romantic viability. This clearly

demonstrates the important potential for capital conversion not only within day-to-day social interactions, but also specifically in the sexual field. Women in both countries distinguished themselves and demonstrated cultural capital through discussions of taste, classifying literature, and analyzing and classifying the cultural consumption of others against whom they judge themselves. Participation in book clubs allowed women to construct cultural boundaries and legitimate their own cultural consumption, while building cultural capital.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **EXPLORING SEXUAL IDENTITY THROUGH READING AND BOOK CLUBS**

Women in the United States and in Ireland explained to me that reading provides a sort of “safe place” in which to develop and negotiate gendered and sexual identity. Many women expressed this safe place as important during early adolescence, and as they began exploring their own sexual identities. While these negotiations often began in childhood and adolescence, they continued throughout the life course, both in personal reading and in discussions at book club meetings. Women negotiated sexuality, developed erotic habitus, built erotic capital and navigated the social-sexual world through their own reading practices as well as within the context of the book club.

#### **EROTIC CAPITAL AND PLAYING THE FIELD**

In this dissertation, I expand the notion of erotic capital and sexual fields. A great deal of previous research examined sexual fields as particular niches in which sexual activity is central, such as gay and lesbian bars, bathhouses, or fraternity parties. I argue that sexual fields do not exist merely in specific niche scenes, but are at work in many social interactions, particularly for participants in normalized heterosexual contexts. Even while participating in book clubs, where sexual interactions were not taking place, women were developing erotic capital that was utilized in day-to-day participation in the sexual field, including dating, interactions with significant others or potential sexual partners, or in interactions with spouses. I will discuss erotic capital and the sexual field and will address the

ways participation in women's book clubs increase women's erotic capital and their ability to play the sexual field.

There is a clear link between individual desire and collective sexual life, and individuals navigate this terrain within particular sexual fields (Green 2008a). An examination of sexual field and erotic capital includes important key themes. People bring their preexisting desires into the sexual field, but the particular environment, or the particular sexual field itself, socializes desire. For example, research about gay men who fit a particular physical profile, such as that of the "bear" (a larger, often hairy, rugged-looking male who portrays a traditional sort of masculinity), suggests that while many gay men who fit the "bear" description do not identify initially as bears or feel attracted to other bears, once they enter the sexual field of a "bear bar" where sexual desirability is linked to these specific traits, they experience high levels of erotic capital, and begin to identify as bears and continue to interact in a sexual field in which they have high erotic capital and desirability (Green 2008b). The same is true for BDSM clubs, in which newcomers may not feel a desire to participate in BDSM, but over time, by learning about the field and gaining erotic capital and sexual popularity through participation in the field, people begin to sexually desire the same acts they may not have been interested in before becoming involved in the scene (Hennen 2008). We literally *learn* desires within specific sexual fields and this becomes internalized into our erotic habitus. Sexual fields simultaneously construct and reflect desire:

Desire and desirability in the context of a sexual field are much more than merely a collection of individual desires; they are, in significant measure, *field effects* that represent the transformation of individual desires into



“hegemonic systems of judgment” (Martin and George 2006:126), or, in the language of the sexual fields framework, *structures of desire* (Green 2013:14).

Thus, we cannot examine sexuality and desire as individual characteristics or urges that are inherent or exist outside of sexual fields. Instead, desire and sexuality are a part of habitus. As habitus refers to the beliefs, practices, value sets, and ways of existing in the social world that are structured not only by discourse but also through pervasive social institutions, then erotic habitus includes bodies, affects, and ways of being in the sexual field, knowledge, roles, and one’s understanding of sexual scripts. Consumption of literature and participation in women’s book clubs played an important role in the development of erotic habitus for the women I interviewed.

Erotic capital refers to one’s location in the social-sexual structure. This includes desirability within a sexual field, as well as how much erotic capital is interconvertible with other forms of capital (Green 2013). Desire itself is socially relative, and people who are seen as desirable become more desirable within a field, and those who are undesirable become less so in a field where they are not popular (Martin & George 2006). Erotic capital varies by field and is thus a characteristic of a particular field, and not an individual. What is high erotic capital in one field, such as a lesbian sports bar, may be low erotic capital in another, like a fraternity party. Erotic habitus becomes intrinsic to one’s way of being in the world, but can have differential effects. Low erotic capital can decrease self-esteem (Thoits 1999). Those with low erotic capital in their sexual field may turn to using sexual availability and accessibility, regardless of erotic capital, to attract others (Neumark-Sztainer et. al

2005). In this sense, those with low erotic capital may lose agency in playing the sexual field, as their choices become less about their own desires and pleasure and more about attracting others in order to increase erotic capital (Green 2011).

To participate in, or “play” the sexual field, people have to have an understanding of the field itself. This includes knowing what is desirable, what one is to desire, understanding sexual scripts, and knowing where they fit into the field. Women in book clubs were actively doing this in many ways, from learning about sexuality and socially sanctioned desires to figuring out how to parlay this knowledge into romantic relationships. Women reading on their own as well as getting together and talking about gender and sexuality, be it overtly or otherwise, led to knowing the “story” of appropriate and desirable sexuality, which then became a part of their individual erotic habitus. In this way, women used literature and participation in book clubs to increase erotic capital and to be best prepared to play the sexual field.

## DISCOVERING AND SHAPING SEXUAL IDENTITY

Early reading provided models of romantic expectations and sexual behaviors for a majority of the women I interviewed. These models clearly made an impact, as women consistently referred to the ideals of romantic fiction they grew up reading. Reading in childhood and early adolescence played an important role in shaping sexual identity. Women told me about the ways they utilized reading to figure out who they were, what sex was, what it meant to be sexual, and how they could explore it. Leah, a retired school teacher in Denver, was raised in a high-

achieving family with well-educated parents. Her family traveled yearly, both within the United States and Europe, and as a teen, she looked forward to spending her early twenties exploring the world, after which she planned to live in New York City. Leah “soaked up” books about glamorous people and lifestyles during her adolescence. At the same time, she explained that although she felt shy and unable to explore sexuality with others as a teenager, she turned to reading. Leah explained, “when I was younger it was a curiosity, in a way, to learn more about it and find out about those escapades.” Girls and adolescent women made sense of emotions and relationships and learned to understand meaning in relationships through reading, particularly in romantic stories or other stories about relationships. It is important to remember that this learning about the cultural romantic narrative “is not a process where girls are passive recipient of inculcation into romanticism, rather it is a resource they draw upon in making sense of their emotional and social world” (Jackson 1993:215). Interviewees told me they felt reading provided them the opportunity to begin exploring their own sexual identities beyond what seemed to be expected of them, demonstrating the use of literature as a resource in this sense. As Rachel, a 34-year-old business analyst in Dublin told me, when discussing the ways she developed her own sense of sexuality through reading, “it also gives me permission to be more free. In my brain and in my actions.” Women gave themselves permission to develop a sense of sexual identity, and sexual desires, through consistent interaction with literature. In my research, it became clear that this use of literature as a resource expanded beyond romantic ideals. Not only were girls discovering romance and emotion, but many readers,

particularly the women who self-identified as voracious readers in adolescence, were actively seeking to learn about sexuality, sexual codes and sexual scripts, often separate from “romance.” Jan, a 39-year-old music teacher in Dublin, grew up in a rural community in a very religious family, and was one of seven children. Her parents did not talk to her about sex or sexuality, and she explained that for a long time she felt isolated and confused due to her own sexual interests. She explained,

When you're on the ground that's shaking, it's for you to test out a different way of thinking. Because in that time I also became sexually active and explored that part of me, because I was on unstable ground, exploring who I was, and my place in society, and my sense of self, that exploration, to explore into everything. It wasn't just me in the society in general, but me as a female, and it was a very broad sense of human sexual exploration.

These women felt interested in sexuality, but did not feel they were able to engage and explore sexually in their lived experiences with others. Thus, books and reading became a way to discover the sexual world around them, as well as to begin discovering and developing their own sexuality.

### *Exploring Adolescent Sexuality*

Overall, the women I interviewed tended to identify strongly as shy people or introverts. A large number explained that they did not feel comfortable around their peers as kids or teenagers, and expressed that they were socially awkward. As adolescents, many did not participate in the dating rituals or sexual relationships they assumed their peers were having. Instead, these women used reading to explore romance, dating, and sexuality in a way that felt safe and meaningful, but

also private. Anna, a corporate manager for an American cosmetics company, age 43, who married in her thirties, expressed this sentiment:

So, personally for me reading was a way to learn about sexuality. I was an awkward, gangly, shy not very confident teenager; I don't think I had a boyfriend until I was in college. So reading was definitely a way to live an emotional life if you will, live a relationship life in the absence of the real thing, and definitely explore emotion and explore sexuality and what it meant.

Of course, it is worth noting that this was not the experience of all the women I interviewed. Specifically, some women had barriers to their literature choices – such as children whose parents chose all their reading material, people who lived in very rural areas and did not have access to libraries or book stores, and women who had experienced poverty and lack of educational resources during early childhood. For these women, literature did not play the same role in shaping their sexual identity – but at the same time, they could all identify the first “sexual” book they read, discussing sneaking off to read Danielle Steele or Gillian Cooper in secret, even as an adult. Thus, it seems that even for women who did not have tremendous access to literature and the kinds of romantic novels that played a role in the development of sexual identity for a majority of the women I interviewed, these cultural codes of romantic ideals and ideal sexual behaviors remained important. Explorations and identity development in childhood and adolescence continued into the adult lives of book club members, and remained important to their own understandings of sexual identity. Literature allowed women to explore their own desires, and examine new ideas, experiences, and ways of thinking about sexuality in a safe way.

### *Identifying and Developing Desire*

Throughout my interviews, women defined what they found sexy differently, but they all told me that there were sexy elements in what they read. For some, strong character development and intellectual connection between characters was incredibly arousing. For others, reading descriptions of sexual acts was arousing, while still others found the implication of sexual activity, without detailed descriptions, the most enjoyable. Regardless of what women found arousing, they explained to me that literature, as expressed by Claire, “holds up a mirror to your likes, your dislikes what turns you on what turns you off. And so it kind of helps you build out what your identity is, what your sexual identity is.”

Women reported utilizing fiction and nonfiction to identify new sexual experiences they wanted to try to incorporate into their own lives, in both Ireland and in the United States. For some women, this incorporation took place via fantasizing. For example, Leah, the youngest member of her book club at 68 years of age, expressed a feeling of sexual “invisibility” in her day-to-day life. She explained that while people in general don’t seem to think of “old ladies” as sexual, reading was a place for her to continue exploring her sexual desires and having sexual experiences amidst a culture that doesn’t expect or, as she felt, “allow” aging women to continue having a sexual identity and a sexual life.

Seeking new experiences through literature was important in developing their own sexual relationships and interactions for many women. Some women were drawn to specific kinds of passages or interactions in the books they read, sought out more books about it, and then decided it was something they would like

to try out with their current partner. Beth, 40, a librarian in Denver, told me, "It's fundamentally how I understand the world from books. I mean anything that I'm going to do I'm going to probably find a book about it first." For Beth, this meant exploring literature about bondage and deciding that she wanted to try some of the behaviors she read about in her own sex life with her husband. But, she made sure to explain that once she read about something and found it arousing, she read several more books on the topic before trying it herself, just to make sure she felt comfortable with it first. While this echoes some of the experiences of adolescent readers, it is unique in that contemporary readers were often actively seeking to expand their sense of sexuality and learn about their own sexual desires so as to find more pleasure in their own sexual interactions. Another interviewee, Christine, a 32-year-old married graduate student in Denver, explained that she has been able to better understand her own desires, and develop a sense of what she likes, beginning with the books she read as an adolescent and continuing through the books she reads now as an adult. She explained, "It just gives you inspiration and ideas to try new things. I think this really is a case where reading about that kind of stuff in books gave me the permission to try it on for myself." Many women, in both the United States and Ireland, expressed this to me. Rather than simply following a prescribed mold of femininity, avid readers were able conceptualize desire and sexuality in a safe way; they could then become confident about incorporating new experiences into their own sexual interactions and eventually as a part of their sexual identity.

Women also expressed wanting to expand their knowledge and acceptance of a changing sexual climate. Many interviewees explained that they felt they were late bloomers, or that they still subscribed to adolescent ideals of romance and sexuality. At the same time, interviewees also expressed wanting to get beyond these longstanding norms. Claire, a 27-year-old who was navigating her boundaries and comfort levels in a newly polygamous relationship, explained:

That's one of the reasons I'm kind of interested in delving into the sexuality literature is because things are changing culturally and society is changing. And for me, I have personal relationships that are changing and so I have to kind of rework in my mind what I'm okay with and what I'm not okay with...I try to figure out what the idea of "normal" is for a relationship, and it is really starting to come into my own head as there is no normal. You make it up as you go along. And that's a scary thought, and that's one of the reasons I read, is just to see what are other people doing, what other ideas are out there that I could attach to.

For these readers, the sexual climate was broad and often changing. Reading can help women situate themselves and their identity within a changing socio-sexual climate. One could argue that women were seeking literature to reinforce their identity and “learn” their place in an often-tumultuous sexual world. Throughout these interviews, however, women specifically mentioned not feeling comfortable with longstanding norms of feminine sexuality, and wanting to break free of constraints they felt during adolescence and adulthood, including a fear of examining their own sexual wants and desires. In this way, books played an important ground for testing out concepts of sexuality and sexual desire, and a way to safely explore sexuality.



### *Reading and Romantic Relationships*

While women seemed to be employing literature to understand and develop their own desires, when it came to discussions of relationships and romance, longstanding romantic ideals still remained important. Women expressed wanting a partner who loved them exactly as they were. Interviewees wanted a partner who would support their emotional needs and wants, to share common goals and interests, and to share a happy, monogamous, forever after. Many women were able to tell me from memory about the scenes they found most romantic in their favorite books. For example, Ellen, aged 31, a single research librarian in Denver, talked to me about how she spent years being single because she knew she had to meet the perfect man in order to marry. She thought her ideal was attainable because her parents and grandparents had been happily married, but waited until they were in their late twenties and thirties to marry. Ellen believed this was why there had been no divorce in her family, and took that into consideration when she chose to stop dating for a few years. During our interview, she told me she had recently begun actively looking for a partner. When I asked her how she defined “perfect” she told me that she was reminded of a love scene in her favorite book:

She thinks she's fat, and at one point she's trying to like -- just trying to like hide her body, and he just rips her chemise all the way down the front so she can't hide. It's very... I don't know. It's just a moment of such acceptance of who she is and her kind of realization and acceptance of that is just really, really nice.

For Ellen, the perfect mate would accept her and believe she is beautiful, even if she did not believe she meets conventional standards of attractiveness. Many women reiterated this sentiment, explaining that while they personally never felt attractive

or like they fit in, they knew they would eventually find a true, romantic relationship based on these standards. Some women even acknowledged that while they believed such thinking was flawed, they still continued it. Heather, 65, a retired homemaker who lived in Denver for the past twenty years, talked to me about her recent divorce as well as her previous divorce, and what she continually looked for in her romantic relationships. She explained,

I think it's probably played a role in how I perceived love, per say. You know, if you read just optimistic Pollyanna books about boy gets girl and the happy endings to every story, you read enough of that you start to believe that's how life operates... I still have the concept with romance that that person is going to fill more needs in your life than individual friends.

In this way, while women were in some ways pushing boundaries regarding sexual norms and thus experiencing relative freedom in their sexual lives, the longstanding romantic ideals remained. This was demonstrated in a conversation at a meeting of a Dublin book club (Dublin Book Group A) meeting during which club members were discussing a novel in which a tumultuous romantic relationship was central. Club members compared the relationships in the book they read for their current meeting to books the group read in the past, as well as to books they read outside of book club. The women enjoyed the book they read, but felt it was sad, and members were not sure if they felt the book was a love story or not. Still, they felt it adequately reflected a perspective about relationships:

Member A: The strong feelings are there. You fight like hell.

Member B: Everything is passionate. You have passionate sex. You have passionate fights. You have passionate everything.

You passionately want to break up.

Member C: But it is all worth it for that passion, that love.

Member D: Ah, yeah.

Member B: It's true, isn't it?

Member A: We all want that, I think.

Cultural constructions and expectations regarding female sexuality may be changing, but cultural constructions of romantic love still play an important role in feminine identity. Even women who openly talked with me about wanting to challenge patriarchal norms subscribed to the predominant "love story" of women's literature. As Radway (1984) lamented, even romance readers who push the boundaries of femininity don't step outside those boundaries, and romance reading can often serve to reinforce emotional constructions of love, romance, and identity.

#### THE *FIFTY SHADES* PHENOMENON

I began my research in 2012, and at that time, a relatively new book hit the mainstream: *Fifty Shades of Grey*, the first in a trilogy of erotic novels by E.L. James, and its surprising success took the publishing world by storm. The *Fifty Shades* trilogy is composed of three erotic romance novels - *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2012a), *Fifty Shades Darker* (2012b) and *Fifty Shades Freed* (2012c). *Fifty Shades* and its ensuing popularity followed a publication path unlike most contemporary romance novels and erotica. Called *Master of the Universe* in its original 992 page online incarnation, *Fifty Shades* began as fan-fiction of the popular *Twilight* series (Meyer 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008). James, like many others, wrote her take on the popular

book and movie series. Fan-fiction refers to work that is written by people who are fans of a particular book, or film, or character, or actor (Hellekson and Busse 2006). James posted her work under the moniker Snowqueens Icedragon on the popular fanfiction.net site. Based on the online popularity, James modified the fiction she had written and began self-publishing e-books through an online self-publisher called The Writers' Coffee Shop. The book was wildly successful and picked up for large-scale publication by Vintage Books in 2012 (Deller and Smith 2013). The books reached the top of every major bestseller list, outselling even JK Rowling's *Harry Potter* Series (Meredith 2012). According to the publisher, *Fifty Shades* has sold more than 100 million copies worldwide, with over 45 million copies sold in the United States, and breaking publishing records for sales in 2012 in Ireland.<sup>25</sup> In 2015 a film adaptation of the first novel in the trilogy was released, making over \$81 million in the United States in its opening weekend, and breaking opening weekend records in Ireland, earning more than any film there in recent years (D'Arcy 2015).

Wildly popular, *Fifty Shades of Grey* spurred an entire market of commodities, ranging from *Fifty Shades* hotel packages<sup>26</sup> and weekend getaways, a comprehensive line of official sex toys mentioned in the books like "pleasure beads," handcuffs and riding crops, a classical music album, clothing, and books including a guide to BDSM

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<sup>25</sup> Countless news outlets have examined the massive popularity of James's work. See, for example, <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwoway/2014/02/27/283342810/book-news-fifty-shades-of-grey-sales-top-100-million>; <http://www.irishcentral.com/news/irish-women-spent-4-million-on-fifty-shades-of-grey-books-in-2012-185860442-237557061.html>; <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/50-shades-grey-joins-top-10-best-selling-books-how-many-have-you-read-1438234>

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, "The Best *Fifty Shades of Grey* hotel packages," <http://www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2015/02/valentines-day-travel-ideas-every-fifty-shades-of.html>, or "Hotels Offering Naughty *Fifty Shades of Grey* Packages," [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/oyster/hotels-offering-naughty-5\\_b\\_6599570.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/oyster/hotels-offering-naughty-5_b_6599570.html)

and a guide for men to learn about what women might want sexually after reading the trilogy (Alan 2012, Comella 2013, London 2012, Sax 2012, Taormino 2012). The popularity of *Fifty Shades* made light BDSM, at least in the narrow (and often problematic, see for example Barker 2013, Harman and Jones 2013) way it is portrayed in the books, socially acceptable and mainstream, even fashionable (Martin 2013). Capitalism and consumption go hand in hand with the popularity of the trilogy, as portrayed throughout the texts themselves and in the countless products created and sold as a result (Dymock 2013).

The books revolve around a virginal college student, Anastasia Steele, and a twenty-six year old billionaire, Christian Grey. The erotic trilogy follows the love story of the two main characters, and their story includes a central theme of BDSM (bondage, discipline, domination, submission, sadism, and masochism). Most argue the books follow the traditional trope of romantic fiction, a “classical romance,” (Downing 2013:93) not unlike the bodice-rippers featured by Harlequin Romances or Mills & Boon, even echoing fairy tales like *Beauty and the Beast*. This is clearly exhibited throughout the themes underpinning *Fifty Shades* (as well as in countless romance novels of the past hundred years). The central female character is a virgin, whose love and sexuality is awakened by an older, more experienced male. Ana’s desire does not seem to exist before Christian Grey, and her desire is not based in physical wants but on true love. Female submission and male domination are central to the novel, in which an innocent young woman and an older, “damaged” but wealthy and powerful man woos his conquest with romance and luxury. The Christian Grey character is not simply a dominant sexual partner, “he is a Darcy or

Mr. Rochester figure... in a classic romance story of love's power to heal damaged husband material" (Hunter 2013:971).

Responses to the books within academic circles have been varied. Some argued that the increased visibility of BDSM in a mainstream way is important, particularly as it destigmatizes practices that have long been viewed as unusual by the mainstream. At the same time, others argued that the portrayal of BDSM within the novels is deeply flawed, problematic, and even potentially dangerous (Arthurs 2012, Flood 2012). While many deride the writing itself, at the same time, the public awareness and visibility of women reading for pleasure, and taking sexual pleasure in such reading, cannot be ignored.

Whether or not *Fifty Shades* has transgressive and feminist implications rely on larger issues surrounding female desire, agency, and consent. Sexuality and desire are constructed and framed in multiple regulatory ways (Foucault 1990). While discourse about sexuality occurs in more and more public ways in contemporary culture, as evidenced by the *Fifty Shades* phenomenon, these public portrayals and consumption can serve to be even more regulatory and confining, rather than transgressive (Atwood 2006,). For example, the narrative of *Fifty Shades*, while introducing BDSM in a very mainstream way, constructs desire and sexuality that frames desires in a heteronormative, regulatory way. Every portrayal of desire within the trilogy is heterosexual. Writing long before the publication of James's works, Rubin (1984) and Wilkinson (2010) argued that simply seeing more mainstream images of "abnormal" sexual practices does not necessarily signal social acceptance. The mere presence of BDSM imagery can serve to challenge the status

quo, but it can simultaneously perpetuate the “otherness” of nonstandard or non-normalized sexual practices.

Issues of agency and consent go hand in hand, both in critical readings of *Fifty Shades of Grey* and in larger conversations surrounding sexuality. Agency, or the capacity to act and define one’s needs, wants, and sexual desires, as well as the ability to choose when to engage in or end a sexual act, is central to a discussion of both the potentially normative and potentially transgressive possibilities of the cultural consumption of texts like *Fifty Shades*. A critical reading brings up important questions about Anastasia’s true agency, particularly as a virgin, and as a person who had no prior knowledge of BDSM. In James’s books, both parties were always technically allowed to walk away from the dominant-submissive contract developed by Christian (which, incidentally, Anastasia never signed). Additionally, the burden of consent was always on Ana, the submissive. In this way, “the heteronormative dynamic of the active man and passive woman is reproduced” (Barker 2013:898). *Fifty Shades* indeed appears to reinforce longstanding cultural ideologies or assumptions, particularly about men’s natural or inherent sexual desires and needs, and women’s lack of sexual desires or needs of their own (Gavey 2012). At the same time, it is important to examine the ways the mainstreaming of previously “abnormal” sexual practices can prove transgressive, and expand the scope of socially acceptable female sexuality. On the other hand, the transgressive possibilities may be cancelled out through the capitalist consumption encouraged by the texts (Dymock 2013). Many argue that feminist possibilities still exist, amidst the many problematic elements of the texts. As Tsaros argues, “a

recognition of the validity of choosing a sexual role, admittedly within a skewed and patriarchal system, would enable a more honest dialogue” (2013:869). While feminist responses to the text have been overwhelmingly negative, a larger social discussion has indeed begun. The widespread popularity of the *Fifty Shades* trilogy has begun to open social and sexual boundaries and sparked a large-scale social discussion about issues of consent, agency, and female sexuality and desire.

*Fifty Shades of Grey* certainly was not the only erotic fiction on the market, nor was it the first. When I began my interviews, I had not planned to ask any questions about any text in particular. None of the book clubs I attended read *Fifty Shades*, and the women I interviewed explained that they would never read James’s works in their book clubs. Yet, without fail, *Fifty Shades* came up in every single interview. Because of this, I began asking women about the book, and every woman I interviewed – from the age of 24 to 80, American or Irish, had something to say about it. A majority of the women I interviewed seemed to find the current popular culture climate, with ample erotic fiction available to readers, a positive change regarding female sexuality. Lauren, a 30-year-old married woman who worked in the publishing industry in Denver, grew up as the youngest of three children. She was fifteen years younger than her siblings, and told me that because of this she felt like an only child. At the same time, she wondered if she missed out on learning about sexuality because she was too young to eavesdrop on her older siblings’ adolescent conversations. She did not always feel she had role models in her life when it came to open, accepting sexuality, and often turned to books to fill in any gaps in knowledge. Lauren explained, “there is an aspect that acknowledges that



women are sexual beings, and acknowledges desires that are more complex than a husband and wife.” Cara, 34, an American software engineer, married her husband when she was 21, and had been dating him since she was 18. She told me that she had changed a great deal, sexually, since she was first married, and attributed a lot of positive growth and self-acceptance to reading. She echoed Lauren’s sentiment, explaining,

[it] is empowering to kind of see in popular culture that sexuality isn’t just one-dimensional... I guess that it’s okay to admit or be open about the fact that women are sexual beings and that they can have sexual desires.

Women who found *Fifty Shades* empowering expressed great room for possibility. Women said they felt better able to discuss their ideas and sexual desires – both physical and emotional – with partners and friends, and began to consider new possibilities for experiencing pleasure. The word “taboo” and the ability to challenge longstanding taboos came up regularly in these interviews. Not only did popular erotic fiction encourage people to begin considering female sexuality and desire, women also believed it also encourages publishers to continue publishing erotic fiction for women. Mary, 52, a married school teacher in the Denver public school system, said,

I think it does have positive aspects in that it at least has the potential to legitimize erotic fiction and to legitimize in fact women's sexual desire, which is somehow something that seems to be largely considered kind of embarrassing. A woman's erotic life is still suppose [sic] to follow a set of very arbitrary rules, and anytime that something happens that more women are maybe able to negotiate is a good thing, I think.

This text being popular on such a large scale opened up a public dialogue about female desire, and these women felt that this discussion could lend to a more fulfilling sense of sexual identity.

While many women found *Fifty Shades of Grey* a positive step for women, culturally and individually, there were several women who felt very strongly that *Fifty Shades* was not a step in the right direction for women. None of the women who expressed strong negative feelings about the book seemed to have a problem with the graphic sexual nature of the book, nor of the kinds of eroticism expressed in the book. These women expressed to me instead that the relationship between the dominant male character and the submissive female character was unhealthy and dangerous. Evelyn, an Irish social worker, aged 52, said, “I think *Fifty Shades* is rotten abuse!” While every woman who did not like the book mentioned abusive elements, that was not the only issue. Several women argued that the fundamental relationship was so disempowering they felt it outweighed any possibilities for positive social change regarding female sexuality. Claire explained, “She wasn’t trying to find something in herself, like “why do I do this?” She just liked it. The only reason she did it was for him, and I hate that.” These women worried about what kinds of models of relationships younger women, and even their peers, might begin to seek. For these readers, *Fifty Shades* did not feel freeing, but instead felt masochistic and misogynistic.

Overall, women I talked to about *Fifty Shades* felt conflicted. On one hand, interviewees felt the opportunity for women to access literature about sex in a more public way was indicative of great forward progress for women. In this way, women

saw a possibility for “empowerment” as they felt more comfortable openly reading about sex and sexuality. Women felt at ease, for example, when other women in the doctor’s office waiting room were reading the same thing. Women explained that they began having conversations with one another about a genre they told me they would not have openly admitted to reading before. This open dialogue helped many women feel like they had more space to explore their own sexual interests and desires. At the same time, many felt it was not truly as empowering as they wanted it to be, or as they hoped women’s erotic fiction would be. Lana, a 26-year-old elementary school teacher in the Dublin suburbs explained,

If it is something that's opening up conversations about sex and expanding your sexual relationship within your own marriage or your own partnership or whatever, I think that's a good thing. I think it is very important that the sex does become a little bit more open and normalized as something that happens, and it's not just missionary position. It's not just in your bedroom. I think that is very good if it opens people up and expands their mind a little bit. I wish it had been done in the context of a healthier relationship in the book because the relationship was very dominant and not in a “hey, isn't it fun to be a little dominant in the bedroom” kind of way and much more of a controlling, abusive, bribery, very much cycle of abuse kind of way.

In this way, we can see mainstream, contemporary erotic literature like *Fifty Shades of Grey* as both enabling and constraining female readers. While in some contexts, some women feel empowered, others feel disempowered, and this can happen simultaneously among a group of women, or within one reader alone. Anna, 43 and married, demonstrated this conflicted response:

I actually think it's fantastic that so many women are reading the genre because for so long it's been taboo and to have it out in the open and have people talking

about it, I think is great. And I think it's hilarious when I see posts on Facebook of people saying, "my mom is reading *Fifty Shades of Grey*, oh my God." I think that's hilarious, and I think it's great. And I think it is in some ways a sign of the times because if you look at how society has changed its views on sex and its stance toward sex even in the last 20 years, you know, women and girls in particular are becoming sexualized much earlier in life. I don't necessarily think [that] is a good thing, because I think at 13 or 14, you have no clue what you're doing, you're not ready for that kind of pressure. I think that there is also a fine line between women being or feeling confident about themselves and at ease with themselves and their sexuality and being able to express that, and that there is a distance between that and sexual exploitation of women or objectification of women which, we're barreling down that path pretty hard. And I think they used to be more of a distance there and I think were losing some of that and I don't think necessarily that's a good thing. For the genre, maybe, and general acceptance, it is good, but overall, I just don't know.

In Anna's sentiment, we can see the conflicted feelings women had about the *Fifty Shades* trilogy. Women were excited about the potential for women to engage with erotica, but simultaneously worried about the messages perpetuated in the trilogy. At the same time, women in book clubs gained erotic capital through engagement with texts that examined or normalized these newly popularized practices as women integrated this knowledge into their own sexual habitus. Contemporary options can provide an opportunity for women to explore their own sexuality, but these are still mainstream texts that often perpetuate longstanding stereotypes about female sexuality and relationships. Are women then more likely to read something erotic that is 'good enough' in the absence of other options? What leads women to seek out additional options? What are the circumstances that might lead women to seek out or not seek out alternatives to *Fifty Shades of Grey*? These

questions are important, and it seems that female readers, as driving consumers in the publishing industry, will push on to answer these questions.

## RELIGION AND SEXUAL IDENTITY

A significant difference between the American and Irish women I interviewed related directly to questions of sexual identity and religion. Religion did not occur as a central theme in American interviews, but in Ireland the women were exploring sexuality and carving out new spaces in resistance to the Catholic Church, particularly in light of recent scandals and changes in leadership. Religion was relevant for younger and older Irish interviewees alike. In this way, religion became an important emergent theme. Sexuality, then, was conditioned on religion for the Irish women I interviewed, in that the two identities are intrinsically linked. Sexuality is not only tied to book clubs, broadly, but also to the larger societal context. Particularly, in this case, we can see this important larger context was illustrated by the integral influence of Catholicism in Ireland.

Ireland provided a unique comparative opportunity to the United States in learning about constructions of sexual identity because educational, political, judicial and religious institutions have worked in conjunction to perpetuate longstanding norms of gendered sexuality in a way that Irish citizens continually embody (Inglis 2002, 2005). Certainly, American politics, policy, and religion have also worked to justify authoritarian, patriarchal approaches to sexuality, and the state remains important in creating the contexts of gendered lives and structuring power (D'Emilio and Freedman 2012). Social institutions in contemporary

American and Irish society construct and constrain sexuality in important ways. However, Catholicism is entrenched in the ethnic identity of most Irish citizens, and as a result is difficult to disentangle from discussions of identity.<sup>27</sup> Catholicism is deeply connected to Irish identity, particularly for those raised in Catholic families, which constitute a majority of the Irish population. Indeed, every Irish woman I interviewed mentioned the Catholic Church when asked about her sexual identity, but religion was not a central topic for the American women I interviewed. This was somewhat surprising to me, as several of the women I interviewed in Denver were involved in church book clubs. Yet, even these women did not focus on religion as an important element – neither in terms of their own personal and sexual identity, nor in terms of how they learned about or understood sexuality. Irish women navigated sexuality amidst changing cultural norms and expectations, and book clubs provided a space for women to discuss and work through these changing ideals. The erotic habitus of Irish women, then, is culturally and contextually unique.

Irish women explained they were able to maintain long-standing cultural expectations of participation in the Catholic Church without internalizing the messages. However, at the same time, it became clear that many of these messages were indeed internalized even for the women I interviewed who professed to have abandoned any connections with the Catholic Church altogether – especially in the

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<sup>27</sup> The role of the Catholic Church is incredibly important in understanding Irish ethnic identity and sexuality. A detailed examination of the Church falls beyond the scope of this paper, but should not be ignored. For further information about the role of Catholicism in Irish sexuality, see Ferriter 2009; Green and Moane 2000; Hug 2001, Smith 2004; Williams 1999; and Inglis 1997, 2005, 2008. To examine the role of the family in constructing and constraining gender and sexuality, see Conrad 2004; Hilliard 2003; Hoff and Coulter 1995; Meaney 1993; Radosh 2008; and Seward et al. 2005. For research about Irish college students and sexual identity, see Grey and Swain 1996; Stokes 2012. For further examination of the scandals in the Church, see Crowe 2008.

context of discussing their own sexual behaviors. Without fail, Irish women spoke to me of “Catholic guilt” when discussing how they came to develop, understand, and enact their own sexuality. Even the Irish women who identified as non-religious, atheist, or called themselves “reformed” Catholics, mentioned Catholic guilt at the underpinnings of their sexual identity and practices. I asked women to explain to me what they meant by “Catholic Guilt” and while they could not clearly define it for me, they expressed it as a constant feeling of shame about thoughts, ideas, and practices, particularly those that were sexual in nature.

Kate, 31 and married, grew up in Wexford, with an older and a younger brother. Her father was a farmer, and her mother worked part time at the post office. They did not attend mass weekly, but her mother took them with her to mass for holidays and holy days. She did not talk to her parents about sex, and pieced together a great deal of her early knowledge by listening to conversations between her older brother and his friends. After she married, she and her husband moved to Dublin, and she worked in the publishing industry. She said, “Okay, so you know. The Catholic guilt. It’ll always be all the old Catholic guilt. No sex before marriage. No contraception. All of that.” She went on to explain that while she engaged in premarital sex and used contraception, she did not feel that she could truly enjoy her sex life until after she was married. Even still, Kate said the old guilt lingers. She did not feel comfortable asking her husband to engage in sexual activity that he did not suggest, nor did she discuss new sexual activities that she wanted to try. Fiona, a 37-year-old single advertising executive, explained that even as she aged and became somewhat more comfortable with her own sexuality, she simultaneously

felt guilt when she was interested in a partner sexually. Fiona echoed Kate's sentiment, particularly regarding her own development of sexual identity,

Everyone in modern Ireland now is like... the Church has, there's still a little bit of a subconscious underlying I think a bit in society. We would always refer to the Catholic guilt. So there would be a bit of that I think [in developing sexual identity].

While women talked to me about the changes in the sexual climate in Ireland overall, the prevalence of guilt in female sexuality cannot be ignored. Aisling, 28, an administrative assistant who lived with her boyfriend, did not attend mass, and planned to be married in a civil ceremony outside the Church. She was raised in a Catholic family, although her father stopped attending mass when she was in her early teens. Her grandmother was particularly religious, and Aisling often felt it was important to portray to her grandmother that she was Catholic, even while she actually self-identified as an atheist. As such, she attended mass with her grandmother on holidays, and did not tell her Grandmother that she cohabitated with her boyfriend. In other regards, she felt that she was able to live freely, and did not hide her relationship or her religious beliefs from other family members or friends. While she had come to terms with her own identity away from the church, she still experienced remnants of Catholic guilt. She explained,

Even though there's always this trip. You ever hear of the Catholic sin, what's it called? What is it called? We call it something. The sin, the guilt. We all had the Catholic upbringing, which is always there in the back of your mind.

This guilt affected not only the sexual relationships of interviewees, but also impacted the ways they interacted with their friends when it came to topics related



to sexuality. Many women told me they felt far too ashamed or embarrassed to ask their friends about things they did not already know about, and spent a great deal of time making assumptions about the behaviors and knowledge of their peers. This was expressed by, Jan, a music teacher in her late thirties,

It's something probably everyone else would know about, but I didn't. I suppose you wouldn't necessarily be privy to that information unless you looked it up online. I wasn't about to ask anyone! Reading was a safer way to maybe spice your knowledge up a little bit.

Contemporary research has begun to examine the role of a more highly sexualized culture and the influence of media in Irish women's sexual identity (Stokes 2012), but even this research speaks to the difficulties Irish women have with examining or exploring their own sexual desires and pleasures. For Irish interviewees, romantic fiction often served as a source of knowledge and a way to learn about sexuality in a more private way, albeit not without shame in their interests and desires.

The recent changes in the Catholic Church and in social norms for Irish women have the potential to create a unique opportunity for constructing sexuality in new ways. The Irish women I interviewed talked a great deal about how they, and the women they know, utilized pieces of their Catholic upbringing, but did not necessarily conform to expected Catholic norms of femininity in practice, particularly as it related to sexuality. Hannah, aged 32, single, and employed in the publishing industry, felt a close bond with her family. She was raised in Dublin and attended all girls primary and secondary schools. After moving away to attend university, she and her brother and sister moved to Dublin to be near one another. She explained that she always felt supported by her parents and her siblings, but

that she didn't talk to them about her relationships. Hannah talked to me about her wanting to feel confidence to explore her own sexuality, with men and potentially with women. Hannah also found that she often felt ashamed and constrained in acting out any of her fantasies:

It's something maybe you're not, you shouldn't really maybe want to... We aren't to be honest when it comes to things like sex. We've all grown up in Catholic schools, it does still affect you. Even talking about sex can be quite... you wouldn't necessarily do it with your friends.

Niamh, also single, aged 26 and an office manager echoed this sentiment, especially when talking about wanting to consider a "hook up" after a night out with friends. She explained, "I think in that sense the Irish Catholic side is talking there. It's that little bit, well, your mother would think it's a bit distasteful if she knew." In this sense, the women I interviewed were interested in developing a new sexual identity, but seemed to experience a great deal of anxiety in knowing how to go about discovering their own wants and desires, and even more so in acting on it.

This was true even for Irish women who wanted to read *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Natasha, 30, an engaged bank teller explained that she was interested in the books but felt too shy to actually read the series because "when everyone knew what it was about, it's just that Irish Catholic thing of you know, "what's she reading that for?" What people would say? You know." Kathleen, 51, a married school superintendent, tried to explain her discomfort with reading any sort of erotic literature, or even purchasing such literature to read on her own at home. Even though she had an electronic reader and thought no one would be able to tell what

she was reading, her discomfort stopped her from purchasing erotic fiction. She explained,

I think women have always been less sexually liberated than men, especially in Ireland. *Fifty Shades* caused such a fuss over here as well with the Church and all that. Not that we listen to them but there's always a story there.

In this way we can see that the continued constraints of the Catholic Church played an important role in the freedom the Irish women I interviewed felt they had to explore sexual identity – be it through literature or through actually engaging in sexual exploration with others. That said, women spoke openly to me about wanting to explore their own desires, and felt that with time, and with increased social separation from the Catholic Church, a more free sense of sexual identity and desire could be possible for Irish women in subsequent generations.

## SEXUALITY AND BOOK CLUBS

While most of the women I interviewed explained that reading played an important role in their sexual development, women in American book clubs seemed more open to discussing sexuality in actual book club meetings. At book club meetings I attended in Ireland, sex did occasionally briefly come up in conversation, but was not discussed in detail. For example, Irish women spoke about when a character “was with” another character, but did not explicate further. Although Irish women explained to me that they were open to reading about sex and sexuality, the book clubs I attended did not explicitly discuss sex, even when it was prevalent in the books being discussed. This was echoed in my interviews with Irish women about discussing sex at book club meetings. In Ireland, all the women told me they

were interested in talking about sex, or expressed that they openly talked about sex at book club. Yet, when I asked direct questions, or asked for examples from book club, they tended to hedge around the answers; women fidgeted in their seats, clearly not comfortable. In both countries, conversations never veered into personal discussions of sex, as Anne, a 24-year-old college student in Dublin explained, “we have no difficulty talking about sex but we just wouldn’t talk about our own sex lives.”

Many of the American book club meetings involved open discussions of sex and sexual acts, particularly if it was central to the book being discussed in the book club. During the time I spent attending book clubs, three American book clubs and one Irish book club read *Gone Girl* (Flynn 2012). *Gone Girl* is a psychological thriller about a marriage that appears idyllic from the outside, but is fraught with betrayal and extra-marital affairs. The book is written from the point-of-view of both the missing wife and a husband seemingly framed for murder, and includes detailed descriptions of sexual liaisons. This book provided ample opportunities to talk about sex in a fairly graphic way, as demonstrated in the following conversations.

The first conversation took place at a mid-sized book club of twelve women (Denver Book Group A), who met at a different member’s house each month and conducted book club over a potluck style meal. This group was started by a few friends in 2006, and grew from 3 members to 15 and included acquaintances of the founding members. While the women were not close friends, conversations were easy and casual. Most women came to the meeting with a few notes written in the margins of their book, or with notes written in a notebook about what they wanted

to discuss. This group did not work from a question list, but took turns talking about what they found important in the book. These women did not, however, place blame on the “other woman” and felt she was young and not at fault. This group of women was mixed with regard to relationship status, but a majority of the women at this particular *Gone Girl* meeting were unmarried. During the conversation, women did not agree about which character was more problematic – the main character, who staged her own death, or her husband, whom she was punishing for infidelity. Club members had strong opinions about who was the “crazier” party in the relationship and openly debated with one another. This debate involved conversations about the relationship as well as the details of the illicit affair shared in the book:

Member A: I think what really pissed me off, I'd liked Nick throughout the story. Whatever. You're kind of a douchey guy, but at least you're trying to figure it out. I hated it when he was, "Yeah, we're equally fucked up." It's like, "No, no. No you're not. You're a selfish asshole. She's crazy." These are two different things. You can't put that together.

Member B: I'm still thinking. How do you explain this to somebody else if you have another relationship? That you just cheated?

Member A: You can't. You have to explain you're an asshole. Like, "I never cared. I let her go. I found another girlfriend. I came home with twat on my fingers." You have to have these stories and then you go in and explain her side too. You have two shitty sides you have to explain to someone.

Member C: Being alone sounds way more safe.

Member B: Even if she wasn't crazy and planned all this out, I feel like she would have found out that he cheated. She would have still tried to manipulate him somehow to get back in that relationship with him versus starting something new.

Member D: I love some of this stuff where she was so graphic. She talked about how the other woman smelled.

Member A: Twat on her fingers.

Member E: Seriously?

Member A: That was funny. Oh, I forgot you are recording! Ha! Is it okay that I said that?

Christy: Yeah, but I'm happy to stop recording if you'd like.

Member A: No, it's no problem, it is just, I keep saying "twat."

Member E: I don't remember that being, ha ha, even at all in this book! (laughing) I was so distressed. How does that even happen, how do you not hide that before you come home?

Member A: Because he is an asshole.

This conversation continued, and the women went back and forth discussing whether or not the infidelity was warranted. In the end, women decided that infidelity was unacceptable within a marriage, no matter the context. At the same time, members discussed that they, personally, would never choose to be involved in a relationship with a married man, and debated if the character in the book knew the whole time that her boyfriend was married, or if she had been initially misled. The club seemed to agree that infidelity was the worst problem in the relationship,

and determined that the main character's revenge plot was reasonable, given the circumstances.

A similar conversation took place at a different, smaller book club that met at a Denver coffee shop and had nine members in attendance (Denver Book Group B). These women were friends from college and graduate school, and they participated in book club to maintain those relationships as they felt themselves growing apart as their lives changed after college. These women were very comfortable with one another, and multiple conversations often happened at once, with members frequently switching back and forth between topics. For the first forty-five minutes of the meeting, members caught up with one another about life since the previous meeting, discussing kids, husbands, work, and books they read for other book clubs or on their own. Each meeting, one member "hosted" the club, and brought printed questions about the book. The woman hosting, Elena, used a combination of reading questions from the author's website as well as her own questions.<sup>28</sup> The following conversation took place in response to Elena's question about what made club members the most angry as they read:

Member A: What about when he came home and Amy could smell the other woman on his fingers?

Member B: I don't even understand that, it is so gross.

Member C: Like, did he just not wash his hands?

Member B: How skanky do you have to be if you leave a smell on his fingers?

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<sup>28</sup> [http://gillian-flynn.com/gone-girl/discussion-questions/GoneGirl\\_Readers\\_Guide.pdf](http://gillian-flynn.com/gone-girl/discussion-questions/GoneGirl_Readers_Guide.pdf)

- Member D: Maybe he did that on purpose, didn't wash his hands?
- Member B: I don't know, I just can't stop thinking about how gross that is, can you imagine?
- Member C: How did she even stick around after that?
- Member A: To stick around long enough to complete her plan, ya know?
- Member B: I just think she was clearly a skank.
- Member E: Amy?
- Member A: No, the other woman, I think she means.
- Member B: Yeah. If you're leaving a smell behind, something is clearly wrong. And why was he even attracted to that in the first place?
- Member C: Take a shower!

In this book club, women were much less tolerant of the “other woman” and a great deal of debate took place around how much she should have been held accountable for the demise of the marriage. This conversation involved a great deal of discussion about the character’s bodily cleanliness, and what it meant that she was “skanky” and thus, clearly not to be trusted. While two women in the meeting expressed dissenting opinions, particularly that the fault laid solely on the husband when he decided to cheat on his wife, overall, the women in the group found the most fault with the paramour in the book. A majority of the women in this particular book club were married; all were in long-term relationships, and in the same age range as the characters in the book. This conversation appeared to reflect club members’ own discomfort with the thought of infidelity, and placing blame on the “other woman”



while minimizing her social worth due to her sexuality seemed to lessen this discomfort.

The four book clubs I attended that discussed *Gone Girl* (Flynn 2012) were, overall, similar to the examples I have provided. Women debated about appropriate behavior in relationships, and discussed who was to blame in situations of infidelity in marriage. However, the conversations in the United States were more sexually graphic and involved discussions about the sexual relationships portrayed in the book. In Ireland, women also debated which character was at fault, and what was problematic about these relationships, but did so without discussing the sexual acts openly. It is possible that more graphic conversations like these examples also took place in Ireland when I was not present for meetings, but I did not witness the same kind of frank discussions about sex in Irish book clubs. Whether more or less graphic, these conversations served to confirm boundaries about appropriate relationship behavior. In both countries, whether sex was overtly discussed or not, the book club provided a place for women to negotiate sexuality. Book club meetings were a place to define “normal” sexual behavior and relationships, and a place for club members to compare their own experiences and ideas to those of normal others who made up the clubs.

In both countries, there seemed to be expectations about what kind of sexual content was appropriate for discussion at book club. During interviews, when women mentioned sex in the books they read for book club, they made sure to tell me how it progressed the story forward and played a role in character development. Women, both at book club meetings and in interviews, made it clear that

“gratuitous” sex scenes were not something they wanted to read in their book club books, nor did they want to discuss it. Once it was clear that any sexuality portrayed in the book they read was useful to the plot, it was more likely to play into the discussions among club members.

For some book club members, the book club itself was a place to negotiate gendered sexuality, for others it was a place to define “normal” or a place to compare their own experiences and ideas to those of “normal” others. Discussions about sex provided a way for women to place their own interests in a larger social context. Book club was thus a way to gauge other people’s ideas and identities. Corinne, a single law student in Denver, explained, “I think it can help your own opinion evolve and grow. I think it is important to hear other people’s perspectives.” Women asked each other which character they identified with most, and the role of naming acts or characters became apparent in these negotiations. For example, many of the book clubs I attended included long discussions of “kinds” of women portrayed, especially when reading books involving promiscuous characters, or adultery. Women often argued about how characters were portrayed and about who was behaving in acceptable or unacceptable ways in specific contexts. Women argued about who was “slutty” and were really discussing what that meant in terms of erotic capital and habitus. This was exhibited in the following conversation at a Girls Read meeting in Denver:

Member A: I was responding to what you had said earlier, about how she got attention from that. She kept losing friends from that. She kept losing everybody around her.

- Member B: Yeah, everyone knows she is a slut, but new people don't, so they warn her. She's like, "Oh, no. You don't want to hang out with her."
- Member C: Everyone refers to her as that. That's her trait. I always keep thinking, like...
- Member D: Wait, is that a trait? Is that technically even considered a trait?
- Member C: It's her personality. It's her trait. It's her blood. It's her everything.
- Member A: Yeah, and you don't want to associate with that or you're one too.

This is important in the sexual field because being labeled a “slut” can affect one’s erotic capital. For example, Armstrong et al.’s (2014) study of college students demonstrated that sorority members labeled “sluts” by other women in their sorority were marked within the Greek system altogether and lost erotic capital. Women labeled sluts were devalued by fraternity brothers as well, because associating with or dating a known “slut” decreased men’s erotic capital. Those in a particular field understand the social implications of losing capital in the sexual field, as demonstrated by Armstrong’s work, and as exhibited in book club meetings in Ireland and the United States.

Not all books elicited the same response from all readers, and not all women agreed. Club members did not always agree about which character was behaving in sexually inappropriate ways and which character was not “doing anything wrong.” While some members felt very strongly about infidelity, other women expressed discomfort with judgmental feelings about the “other woman” and argued that this particular character had every right to express her own sexual identity in any way

she chose. Through these discussions, book club members were able to navigate their ideas about sexuality via fictional characters. This allowed women to determine what kind of women they identified with by providing a space for them to determine what kind of behaviors they found acceptable, and what kind of women they believed themselves to be.

While the content of discussion surrounding sex and sexuality differed at Irish and American book clubs, and was necessarily linked to the books being read, underlying themes of sexual identity were present throughout. In this way, book clubs served as a space for women to negotiate their identities. Thus, while sexuality may or may not have been explicitly discussed in book club meetings, depending on the geographical location and the books being discussed, the women I interviewed believed that fiction provided an important medium through which to identify and understand desires. This took place in a way that also allowed them to feel more comfortable exploring their own desires, first in fiction, and for many, later, in their lived experiences.

It is clear that Irish women were navigating sexual identity amidst changing cultural norms and expectations, and book clubs provided a space for women to discuss and work through these changing ideals. In Ireland, the women I interviewed were exploring sexuality and carving out new spaces and identities in direct resistance to the church, particularly in light of recent church changes. Sexual habitus was heavily marked by religion for Irish women in a way that was not apparent for American women. Amidst the changing landscape of Irish sexuality, the Irish women I interviewed were actively rejecting elements of their religious

upbringing while simultaneously weaving it into their narratives of gendered sexual identity. In both countries, book club members are navigating sociocultural norms and expectations while developing their own sense of sexuality and desire through the use of fiction combined with conversations at book club meetings.

## **CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSION**

This dissertation examined the role of reading and book club attendance in the lives of Irish and American women's fiction readers who actively participated in women's book clubs. Utilizing both in-depth interviews and ethnographic observation and participation in women's book club meetings, I uncovered strategies women used to incorporate fictional narratives into their own personal narratives, particularly as it related to gendered sexual identity. Clear differences emerged in the different national and thus cultural contexts, especially relating to the role of reading in romantic relationships. At the same time, important themes relating to social positionality, capital development, and sexual identity were similar in cultural environments in which women's sexual agency may look very different from the outside.

### **KEY FINDINGS**

I examined how women developed a sense of social place and status, constructed desire and developed gendered sexual identities through reading and participation in women's book clubs. Women in Ireland and the United States utilized reading to develop a sense of self and to learn about the social world, as well as to begin learning about sexuality. As women became adults, reading was deeply entrenched in their habitus, and attending book clubs allowed them to continue engaging literature and gain knowledge about the world around them. Interactions

at book club meetings served to increase and maintain social capital, cultural capital, and erotic capital.

To situate the discussion, this dissertation reviewed the historical relevance of women's readings groups, particularly with regard to developing important social capital. Early women's book clubs served to educate women who did not otherwise have access to formal education. Women's thirst for knowledge meant that reading groups not only gathered together to pursue knowledge, but that women's reading groups were at the forefront of one of the most important contemporary educational institutions, the public library. Additionally, women's reading groups pursued educational activism, and played an important role in changing the educational landscape, particularly in the United States.

In the mid-1990s, reading groups in the United States and in Europe experienced a resurgence, due to new publicity of large-scale book clubs, influenced predominantly by Oprah Winfrey's "Oprah's Book Club." Since this time, women's book clubs have remained strong worldwide, and while book club members are generally well-educated and privileged, book clubs still serve important educational and social purposes.

Women became readers through early childhood exposure to reading, and the women I interviewed were generally encouraged by their parents to read during childhood. Women fondly recalled their experiences choosing books and going to the library as children. Once reading became ingrained at an early age, women continued to place great importance on reading as a part of their identity, as it became an integral element of the habitus of readers. Interviewees expressed joy in

reading, but also felt that they would be missing a part of who they were if they did not actively pursue their interests in literature and reading. Because of the centrality of reading to many women's identities, these women pursued book clubs to meet like-minded others and maintain important social connections linked to their particular habitus as active readers.

Irish and American women utilized their experiences in book clubs to develop knowledge and confidence. Many of the women I talked to explained they had been very shy as children, and believed this had added to their interest in reading when they were young. Sociological research demonstrates that women are socialized to be shy, meek, and timid (Ashmore et al. 1986; Atwood 2006; Beres and Farvid 2010; Bettie 2003; Brooks and Herbert 2006; Consalvo 2006; Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Ronen 2010; Sloop 2006), and for the women in this study, participation in book club allowed them to overcome this longstanding gendered expectation. Conversations with other readers allowed women to identify their own arguments and practice talking about their ideas, feelings, and opinions within the context of a group in which they felt safe. This development of knowledge and understanding was especially important for the Irish women I interviewed.

Developing strong relationships played an important role for women in Irish and American book clubs in the form of increased social capital. Because social capital increases well-being and overall physical and mental health, book clubs became a way for women to acquire social networks that often fell by the wayside as they aged. Opportunities to experience environments with built-in social networks, like college, diminish as personal networks shrink as people move beyond their



mid-twenties, and book clubs provided a way to mitigate this change. At the same time, many women spoke about the difficulties of female friendships, and many expected book clubs to be “catty” or challenging. However, in my observations and interviews, I did not witness or hear about any of these kinds of experiences; this speaks to the larger gendered expectations of femininity and female friendships. In this sense, women in book clubs may be actively engaging in gendered behaviors that challenge gendered norms, but simultaneously adhering to cultural expectations about women’s relationships. For most women, book clubs were a place of important social connections and a way to maintain relationships with other women. Many of the women I interviewed developed particularly strong friendships through book club, and these connections provided support for them in important and deeply personal ways as they navigated difficult life experiences and transitions.

Status development and cultural capital proved important themes in my interviews, and this was particularly true for American book club members. The social positionality and cultural capital of book club members played important roles in how women chose their reading material and how they interpreted the texts they read. Book clubs served to reinforce cultural boundaries. A vast majority of the women I interviewed and who attended book club meetings were white, middle or upper-middle class, well-educated, heterosexual women. In this way, the women attending book clubs and participating in interviews brought a great deal of privilege to their experiences. At the same time, women consistently spoke to me about the “diversity” within their book clubs. Over time, I came to realize that this

diversity referred to diversity in opinions, political leanings, and career choices. These interactions demonstrated the invisibility of race and class-based privilege among the club members I interviewed. This invisibility, while not outright exclusion, has been historically problematic in women's reading groups, as it serves to perpetuate cultural capital and status for only a select few. The cultural capital attained through book club membership is most accessible to women who already have important cultural knowledge and access to high cultural capital. In this way, book clubs often reinforced and maintained the status of privileged women who determine legitimate literature and reading habits.

Status was particularly important for American interviewees, in that being well known as a reader, or literary, was considered an important characteristic. American women wanted to be recognized as intellectuals, and recognized the importance of cultural capital and its potential to parlay into increased economic, social, and erotic capital. These women also discussed the importance of cultural capital in romantic relationships. American interviewees expressed that potential partners must also identify as active readers, and some joined book clubs specifically to be more attractive to potential mates. American interviewees were aware of role of literary consumption in their own social positionality as well as the importance of partnering with men with similar tastes and levels of cultural capital. On the other hand, Irish women encouraged their friends and loved ones to read because they personally took great joy in reading, but they did not place the same level of importance on the status conferred through reading and book club membership, especially in romantic relationships.

Women in both countries distinguished themselves through discussions of taste, particularly regarding classifying literature and analyzing the reading habits of others. On one hand, women in book clubs actively worked to challenge larger stereotypes that female authors, and fiction read by women, is not literary or intellectual. The publishing industry tends to perpetuate and herald male authors while deriding women's fiction as less valuable, often minimizing it as merely leisurely drivel, "beach reads" for women. The women I interviewed expressed disdain for this particular process and explained that they use book club to examine literature that may not have garnered great public reception or critical acclaim, but was still valuable and literary in its own right. On the other hand, club members actively differentiated between the kinds of reading they did and less highbrow, more casual or popular literature consumption. Interviewees drew a clear line between what they read and chick lit, often explaining that chick lit was not "real" literature. Status was conferred through the comparisons interviewees made between their own reading habits and choices and the reading habits of others. American and Irish women demonstrated their cultural habitus by reading highbrow books, as opposed to magazines or solely popular romantic fiction, and by engaging in judgment of people who choose not to read or only watched television in their spare time. All of this activity constituted boundary work, and through reading and participation in book clubs, women constructed symbolic boundaries that justified women's choices in both how they spent their time and the material they chose to read. Women distinguished their own social positionality and demonstrated their habitus and cultural capital through their conversations about

literature, taste, and the cultural consumption of others. Literature choice, boundary maintenance, and book club participation worked together to confer status and maintain book clubs as worthwhile, legitimate, and culturally relevant for American and Irish women's book club members.

A central finding in this dissertation examines the ways women utilized reading and participation in book clubs to construct and navigate their own gendered sexual identities. Interviewees negotiated gendered sexuality, built erotic capital, and demonstrated erotic habitus through lifelong reading habits and participation in women's book clubs as adults. Reading played an integral role in the discovering and shaping sexuality for interviewees in Ireland and in the United States. Women utilized books to learn about and explore sexuality in a safe way, without the risk of embarrassment or emotional pain that came with interpersonal relationships. Women learned about emotions and romantic relationships, but more specifically, actively sought literature to begin to understand sexual scripts and gendered expectations in romantic contexts. As women entered adolescence and early adulthood, they continued to utilize reading in their sense of personal sexual identity. Some women engaged fiction in fantasy; others used fiction to determine what they might like to try out in their own sexual interactions. For interviewees, reading provided an opportunity to work through a sense of desire and sexuality and develop confidence in their own wants and needs.

Women incorporated dominant heteronormative sexual norms into their own sexual identities, and this was particularly apparent when discussing romantic relationships and ideals. Even when interviewees were exploring their own sex lives

in ways that challenged norms about demure female desire, this took place within the context of seeking to be swept off their feet by an accepting, romantic partner with whom they could share a happily ever after. Interestingly, this conversation surrounding romance played out in discussions of the *Fifty Shades of Grey* erotic fiction trilogy. This series, amidst great potential for challenging norms of female desire and sexuality, also perpetuated these same longstanding romantic norms. Particularly, the trilogy perpetuated heteronormative concepts of feminine desire based primarily in meeting the needs of, and being desirable to, a male partner. Interviewees felt conflicted about the popularity of the series. Many women felt that it meant that women were able to read erotica more openly, and thus publicly acknowledge feminine desire; at the same time, elements of the texts were deeply troubling for many women, and they felt ill-at-ease with portrayals of sexuality in the midst of issues such as potential abuse and questionable consent. Contemporary women's erotic fiction provided an opportunity for women to explore their sense of sexual identity and explore their own desires, but did so within the context of longstanding patriarchal norms about female sexuality.

The influence of religion was an important element of sexuality for many of the women I interviewed. In the United States, women did not discuss religion as an important element of their sexual identities. Irish women, though, expressly developed a sense of gendered sexuality in the context of, and in resistance to, the Catholic Church. The intersection of personal identity and cultural and religious identities is clear when examining the role of the Catholic Church in Ireland's history, and this, too, became embodied in Irish women's erotic habitus. Irish

interviewees often expressed particular fears about sexuality and their bodies, and guilt and shame about wanting to learn more or experiencing their own desires. Reading, and later book club attendance, helped these women work through those fears. Irish women continually navigate their gendered sexual identity amidst changing cultural norms and expectations about Irish femininity and religion. Reading and participating in women's book clubs provided important opportunities for Irish women to discuss and work through changing cultural ideals regarding gender and sexuality.

In both the United States and Ireland, book club provided a place to work through concepts of "normal" desire and sexuality. Women often compared their own experiences and thoughts to the experiences of women in the books they read. Book club discussions about sex and sexuality provided a way for women to place their own interests in a larger social context. While women did not always agree with one another, they utilized these discussions to navigate their own ideas about sexuality and determine what particular traits, behaviors, and desires with which they most identified. Conversations about relationships allowed women to determine which characters and behaviors they identified with through discussions about behaviors they found acceptable, or examining what "kinds" of women engaged in specific behaviors. Moreover, women identified with or distinguished themselves from fictional characters, demonstrating their own beliefs, desires, and thus erotic habitus.

## LIMITATIONS

There are limitations to this study, as with any sociological research. This research demonstrated useful insights about the importance of reading and women's book club attendance, particularly as related to gendered sexuality. However, these results cannot be generalized to all readers or book club members as a whole. These findings are useful in developing a clearer understanding of how women utilize cultural objects, like novels, as well as reading and social groups constructed around reading, and extend our sociological understanding of gender and sexuality, but they do not speak to the experiences of all women, or all women readers.

I utilized multiple sampling strategies, including widespread social media recruiting and recruiting at book club meetings. Because I relied on club members to approach me if they were interested in participating in interviews, my sample is likely representative of more outgoing book club members. Readers who still felt shy or were more introverted may not have reached out to me in this research, and therefore these results cannot be generalized to all women readers or all women's book club members. Additionally, the sample size of 36 book club meetings and 53 in-depth interviews means that this research cannot be assumed to be indicative of all American women's experience or all Irish women's experiences of gendered sexuality. While I gained important insight from the women I interviewed, it would be remiss to make broad sweeping assumptions about Irish or American femininity. This research should be utilized in conjunction with the wide field of research about American and Irish gender and sexuality.

## CONTRIBUTIONS TO SOCIOLOGY

Sexuality and sexual identity are important concepts within sociology, and this work adds to the field in continuing an examination about how individuals develop a sense of sexual identity. This dissertation reveals the importance of reading in the development of sexual identity and knowledge for book club members, thus adding to our understanding of gendered sexuality. Additionally, this work demonstrates the incredible significance of cultural objects, like books, in the lives of readers. Women in Ireland and in the United States bolstered their capital portfolios through long-term reading habits and participation in women's book clubs.

In this dissertation, I expand the notion of erotic capital and sexual fields. While previous research examines sexual fields as found in specific niche environments (Green 2008a, 2008b, 2011, 2013), I argue that sexual fields are at work throughout social interactions, especially for participants in normalized heterosexual contexts. While the book club meetings interviewees attended were not sexual in nature, women gained important erotic capital through participation. This erotic capital was utilized in daily interactions in the sexual field, for example, in dating, or interacting with potential significant others, or in interactions with spouses.

Overall, this dissertation demonstrates that book club participation, generally fueled by a lifetime of engagement with reading, increased the overall capital portfolio of women's book club members. Reading additionally provided women with a way to understand their own identities and gain knowledge about the



social-sexual world. In short, book club participation increased social, cultural, and erotic capital.

Janice Radway's influential work over 30 years ago, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*, shed important light on the relationship women readers have with romantic fiction and paved the way for social scientists to begin taking women's reading seriously. In *Reading the Romance*, Radway concluded, "All popular romantic fiction originates in the failure of patriarchal culture to satisfy its female members" (1984:151). This conclusion truly spurred my research, and pushed me to consider how patriarchal culture impacts women's identities, as well as how women readers might find ways to carve out a sense of self and a sexual identity within this patriarchal context. Radway's sentiment continually rang true throughout my observations at book clubs and in my interviews. Women readers in Ireland and the United States didn't always feel that they "fit" the norms of femininity and gendered sexuality. Reading provided the women I interviewed a sort of touchstone, a place to which they felt they could always return. In the safety of reading, women were able to develop and negotiate their own identities. At the same time, reading did not serve to compensate for lacking satisfaction with life, relationships, and roles in my study the way it did in Radway's work. Instead, this research demonstrates how women utilize reading, and ways in which book clubs provide an important social outlet that the women in Radway's study did not have. Book club attendance provided the women I interviewed important social connections, and helped bolster cultural capital and erotic capital.

The setting of book club meetings provided women an additional chance to challenge and negotiate conventional norms of femininity and sexuality. Women constructed identities and carved out their own space in the world, in part through participation in women's book clubs. Rose, a retired teacher who had been attending book clubs for 60 years when I interviewed her, summed up her experiences with book clubs in a way that encompassed the feelings of all the women I interviewed:

Everybody brings something different to the table. Everything you bring to a book and a book brings to you, is because of your own experiences. You are bringing that when you begin to discuss it, that comes out, and I think that's a wonderful gift.

This gift, the opportunity to explore literature with like-minded women and define one's identity in doing so, cannot be overstated. It is true that reading can be intensely personal, something we undertake alone in our free time. Even for those who do not participate in book clubs, reading is never asocial. The women I interviewed approached texts with predetermined knowledge, ideas, and experiences. Readers did not experience texts the same way, and each person brought a unique perspective to understanding the meaning in the books they read. Throughout my research, the centrality of reading in the lives of book club members remained clear. Women used fiction, as well as participation in book clubs, to determine who they were and how they fit in the social-sexual world. Further research must examine the ways women continue to utilize cultural tools to navigate our ever-changing, but still patriarchal culture and develop a sense of gendered sexuality.

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## APPENDIX A BOOK CLUB READING LIST

### Girls Read

August 2012: *The Night Circus* by Erin Morgenstern  
September 2012: *The Spare Room* by Helen Garner  
October 2012: *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald  
November 2012: *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn  
December 2012: *Tom Dick and Debbie Harry* by Jessica Adams  
January 2013: *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel  
February 2013: *Daughter of Smoke and Bone* by Laini Taylor  
March 2013: *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak  
April 2013: *Ada's Rules: A Sexy Skinny Novel* by Alice Randall  
May 2013: *The Paris Wife* by Paula McLain  
September 2013: *Wild* by Cheryl Strayed

### Women, Reading, and Wine

August 2012: *The Paris Wife* by Paula McLain  
October 2012: *The Time in Between* by Duenas  
November 2012: *The Toss of a Lemon* by Padma Viswanathan  
December 2012: *A Movable Feast* by Ernest Hemingway  
January 2013: *The Rules of Civility* by Amor Towles  
March 2013: *Playing Nice* by Rebeka Crane  
June 2013: *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen  
September 2013: *The Corrections* by Jonathan Franzen  
December 2013: *The Light Between Oceans* by M.L. Stedman  
January 2014: *The Language of Flowers* by Vanessa Diffenbaugh  
April 2014: *The Woman Upstairs* by Claire Messud  
June 2014: *The Pearl that Broke Its Shell* by Nadia Hashimi  
July 2014: *The Valley of Amazement* by Amy Tam  
October 2014: *Wild* by Cheryl Strayed

Denver Book Group A

March 2013: *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn

April 2013: *The Shoemaker's Wife* by Adriana Trigiani

May 2013 : *Siddhartha* by Hermann Hesse

June 2013: *A Million Miles in a Thousand Years* by Donald Mille

Denver Book Group B

February 2013: *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn

Dublin Readers

August 2013: *More Lives Than One* by Jenny Williams

Dublin Women's Reading Club

August 2013: *Attachments* by Rainbow Rowell

August 2013: *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn

Dublin Book Group A

August 2013: *Me Before You* by Jojo Moyes

Dublin Book Group B

August 2013: *Ratlines* by Stuart Neville

Dublin Book Group C

August 2013: *The Paris Wife* by Paula McLain

## APPENDIX B ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORK RECRUITING EXAMPLES



**Gutter Bookshop**  
@gutterbookshop



Follow

Calling all book groupers - check out [womensfictionstudy.com](http://womensfictionstudy.com) if you fancy talking about books groups for a PhD. Christy is lovely!



RETWEETS

3

FAVORITE

1



8:16 AM - 23 Aug 2013



**Nici Sullivan**

26 February 2013 ·



Calling all book club members - check it out and give some time please. [Grainne](#), [Siobhán](#) and [Alicia](#). If you have some time take a peek and pass it on.

### Women's Fiction Study

Are you a woman who loves to read? Do you attend book clubs? Volunteer to take part in a study about what reading and book clubs mean to you!

[WOMENSFIXIONSTUDY.COM](http://WOMENSFIXIONSTUDY.COM)

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**APPENDIX D**  
**PROFILE OF INTERVIEWEES**

<i>NAME</i>	<i>PARTICIPANT</i>	<i>AGE</i>	<i>RELATIONSHIP STATUS</i>	<i>OCCUPATION</i>
Anna	A1	43	Married	Corporate Cosmetics Manager
Corinne	A2	27	Single	Law Student
Karen	A3	36	Married	Young Adult Author
Maria	A4	29	Single	Non-Profit Public Policy
Claire	A5	27	Partnered, Polygamous	Elementary School Librarian
Laura	A6	37	Married	Social Worker
Shirley	A7	66	Divorced	Retired CFO
Heather	A8	65	Divorced	Retired Homemaker
Carolyn	A9	74	Widowed	Retired Teacher
Frances	A10	71	Widowed	Retired Nurse
Alice	A11	31	Single	ESL Teacher
Cheryl	A12	36	Married	Publishing Industry, Former Teacher
Kelly	A13	33	Married	Publishing Industry
Beth	A14	40	Married	Librarian
Rose	A15	80	Widowed	Retired Teacher
Mary	A16	52	Married	Teacher

<i>NAME</i>	<i>PARTICIPANT</i>	<i>AGE</i>	<i>RELATIONSHIP STATUS</i>	<i>OCCUPATION</i>
Leah	A17	68	Married	Retired Teacher
Christine	A18	32	Married	Graduate Student
Marilyn	A19	58	Widowed	Special Education Teacher
Cara	A21	34	Married	Software Engineer
Lauren	A22	44	Married	Publishing Industry
Ellen	A23	31	Single	Research Librarian
Julia	A24	36	Married	Unemployed
Deenah	A25	38	Single	Veterinarian
Emily	A26	32	Married	Homemaker
Wendy	A27	41	Divorced	High School Teacher
Shannon	A28	28	Single	Book Store Manager
Amber	A29	32	Single	Office Manager
April	A30	31	Single	Graphic Designer
Jamie	A31	25	Partnered	Preschool Teacher
Michelle	A32	29	Married	Ski Instructor
Audrey	A33	33	Single	Waitress
Niamh	IE1	26	Single	Office Manager
Rachel	IE2	34	Married	Business Analyst
Megan	IE3	26	Partnered	Media Researcher

<i>NAME</i>	<i>PARTICIPANT</i>	<i>AGE</i>	<i>RELATIONSHIP STATUS</i>	<i>OCCUPATION</i>
Anne	IE4	50	Married	Office Assistant
Caitlin	IE6	27	Partnered	Library Buyer
Grace	IE7	45	Single	Elementary School Librarian
Lisa	IE8	33	Married	Software Engineer
Fiona	IE9	37	Single	Publishing Industry - Advertising
Victoria	IE10	65	Widowed	Lawyer
Lana	IE11	26	Married	Elementary School Teacher
Maeve	IE12	34	Single	Book Buyer for Major Irish Publisher
Evelyn	IE13	52	Married	Social Worker
Natasha	IE14	30	Engaged	Bank Teller
Anne	IE15	24	Single	University Student
Jan	IE16	39	Separated	Music Teacher
Erin	IE17	42	Married	Nurse
Aisling	IE18	28	Partnered	Administrative Assistant
Kathleen	IE19	51	Married	School Superintendent
Hannah	IE20	32	Single	Publishing Industry

## APPENDIX E

### NARRATIVE INTERVIEW GUIDE

#### Background

- ☐ Tell me about yourself
- ☐ Where did you grow up
- ☐ Family
- ☐ Childhood
- ☐ Hobbies/recreation
- ☐ Is reading important in your life?
- ☐ Have you always felt this way?

#### Reading Habits

- ☐ If we met at a party and began discussing books, how would you describe your reading habits to me?
- ☐ Number of books read each month?
- ☐ Favorite genre (fg)
- ☐ When started reading fg?
- ☐ How interested in fg?
- ☐ Favorite books?
- ☐ Favorite author?
- ☐ Why do you like the books you like?
- ☐ What do you like most about fg? Least?

#### Book Club

- ☐ When started?
- ☐ Why started attending?
- ☐ How often?
- ☐ Why continue attending
- ☐ How would you classify the books you read for book club?
- ☐ Common themes
- ☐ Like most about book club?
- ☐ Like least?
- ☐ What do you most want to discuss at book club?
- ☐ Talk about books outside of book club?
- ☐ Are outside conversations about books different than in book club? How/Why?

#### Identity

- ☐ Is reading important to your identity?
- ☐ Gender
- ☐ Book club important to identity?

#### Relationships and Romance

- ☐ Primary relationships in books discussed at book club?
- ☐ How portrayed?
- ☐ Friendships
- ☐ Romantic relationships?
- ☐ How is love portrayed?
- ☐ What do you think about these fictional portrayals?
- ☐ Relationships mirror your own relationships?

#### Sex and Sexuality

- ☐ Is sex portrayed in the books you read for book club? How?
- ☐ In books outside of book club?
- ☐ Are there elements, characters or scenes in the books you read for book club that you find sexy?
- ☐ What does that mean to you?
- ☐ Is sexuality important in your fg?
- ☐ Do you feel that norms about sexuality have changed in your lifetime?
- ☐ What about in the books you read?
- ☐ Over the time you've read your fg, do you think your conceptions of sex and sexuality have changed?
- ☐ What about in book club?
- ☐ What about the recent popularization of new erotic fiction, in books like *Fifty Shades*
- ☐ Have you talked with your friends about this? What about in book club?
- ☐ Do you think this change is meaningful?
- ☐ Do you think reading is linked to your sexual identity? How so, or why not?